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Naomi Fry (*"Almost There," p. 28*) became a staff writer in 2018 and writes about culture for newyorker.com.

Campbell McGrath (*Poem, p. 24*) published the poetry collection "Nouns & Verbs" in 2019. His work also appears in the anthology "What Is Research?," edited by Peter N. Miller.

Hannah Goldfield (*Tables for Two, p. 13*) is the magazine's food critic. She has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2010.

Caleb Crain (*Books, p. 67*) is the author of "American Sympathy," "Necessary Errors," and "Overthrow."

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

PERSONAL HISTORY

How does an epidemic end? In the twilight of SARS, Karl Taro Greenfeld sees a glimpse of our future.

OUR COLUMNISTS

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor on the coronavirus's disproportionate death toll among black Americans.

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LEFT: WENKAI MAO; RIGHT: JAMIEL LAW

THE MAIL

HOW TO SEE VELÁZQUEZ

Peter Schjeldahl eloquently examines how the world's shutdown during the COVID-19 pandemic may lead us to view art and museums differently (The Art World, April 13th). His discussion of the value of museums reminds me of a comment that Holden Caulfield makes in J. D. Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye." Holden says that the best thing about the Museum of Natural History was that "everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. . . . Nobody'd be different. The only thing that would be different would be you." The museum's static environment is a comfort to Holden as the rest of his life largely evades control. Let us hope Schjeldahl is right when he says that, once the crisis ends, art "may even induce us to consider, however briefly, becoming a bit better, too."

Olga Polites
Cherry Hill, N.J.

I was disappointed by Schjeldahl's assertion that art in virtual galleries is "inaccessible," and that virtual tours are "amorphous disembodiments of aesthetic experience." The idea that great art can only be truly appreciated in a museum alienates those who, even in non-pandemic times, are unable to visit cultural institutions. It implies that such groups cannot have full aesthetic experiences, and, by extension, that they cannot develop artistic taste.

But the virtual museum is a monumental step toward greater cultural accessibility—something that advocates have been trying to achieve for decades. As Schjeldahl says, the pandemic will cause our relationship with art to change. That evolution should include a reëvaluation of the place for art in digital space. We should not dismiss cultural institutions that are making a concerted effort to engage people other than those who can literally walk through their doors. We should instead celebrate virtual art as progress, and demand even more of it.

Bethany Tabor
Brooklyn, N.Y.

THE CURE FOR LONELINESS

Reading Jill Lepore's essay on loneliness, I was taken aback by the author's expression of skin-crawling dread at the prospect of being alone (Books, April 6th). I wouldn't say that I'm happy under shelter-in-place orders, but I disagree with the assertion that solitude necessarily leads to intractable problems. I myself find deep pleasure and freedom in living alone. Many women, after a lifetime of unsupported, unpaid, inescapable caregiving, experience relief and self-actualization on their own. I see Lepore's personal revulsion for aloneness as a condemnation of the efforts of women in this country to break their dependence on others.

Anna Sojourner
San Francisco, Calif.

In progressing from an account of the increased number of single-person households to a discussion of loneliness, Lepore blurs the line between loneliness and solitude. There are many literary testimonials to the difference between the two. One is from Chekhov, who wrote in his notebook, "If you are afraid of loneliness, don't marry." (Chekhov spent several of his married years in Yalta, more than a thousand miles from his wife, in Moscow.) Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a married mother of seven, wrote "Solitude of Self," which is among our most eloquent expressions of every person's fundamental aloneness. And Marianne Moore perhaps put it best when she wrote that "the cure for loneliness is solitude." I have lived alone since my partner died of AIDS, in 1990. I enjoy solitude, and feel no more or less lonely than anyone else.

Fenton Johnson
Tucson, Ariz.

•

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In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, New York City museums, galleries, theatres, music venues, and cinemas have closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found online and streaming.

APRIL 22 – 28, 2020

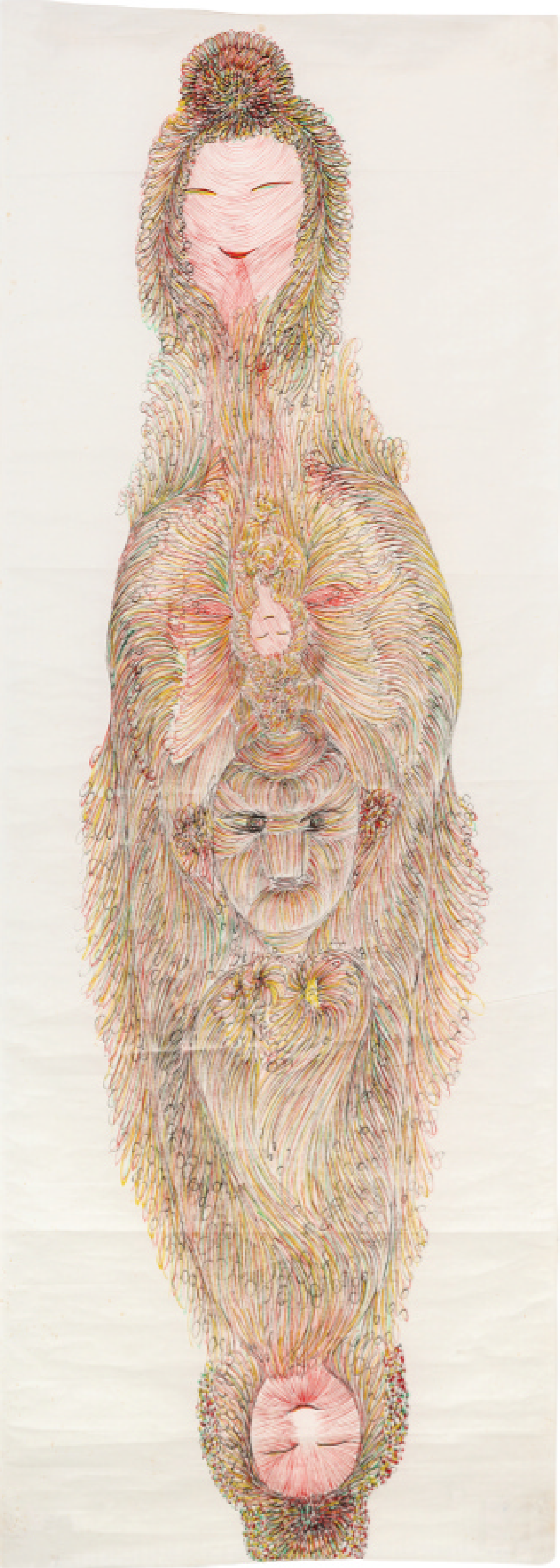
GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

This spring, the pianist **Jeremy Denk** was supposed to present a three-part series on Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier" in WQXR's Greene Space, in downtown Manhattan, but, with the city locked down, he is recording it at his home in the Catskills instead. It's "a place where I pretend to garden and farm as best I can," he said in the introduction to the April 7 concert, before weaving together preludes and fugues with his own perspicacious commentary. The next installment, on April 27, streams on Denk's and WQXR's Facebook pages.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTAAN FELBER

ART ONLINE

For centuries, art was considered a matter of spirit. Then, in the West, modernism sidelined the soul and centered the secular. In the process, some mystically inclined geniuses, especially women, were overlooked, including the newly canonized Swedish painter Hilma af Klint and the underappreciated Swiss spiritualist Emma Kunz. The Chinese artist **Guo Fengyi** didn't begin making her astonishing scrolls until 1989, when she was in her late forties. That was the year of the Tiananmen massacre, but Guo wasn't responding to world events—the mythic beings she brought to electrifying life (including the undated "Avalokiteshvara," seen here) came to her in visions. A few years earlier, severe arthritis had forced the artist to quit her factory job in Xi'an, where she lived until her death, in 2010, at the age of sixty-eight. She took up Qigong to alleviate pain; soon she was transcribing revelations. She believed that her scrolls, most of which are twelve to thirty feet high, had the power to heal. Or you might think of them as monuments to uncertainty—"I draw because I do not know," Guo once said—making the chimeric figures ideal viewing right now. You can read the Drawing Center's richly illustrated and very insightful publication "Guo Fengyi: To See from a Distance" online (drawingcenter.org) and tour a virtual exhibition of the artist's works at the Gladstone gallery's Web site (gladstonegallery.com).—*Andrea K. Scott*



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ART

The Frick Collection

Why does the art of what we term the Old Masters have so much more soulful heft than that of most moderns and nearly all of our contemporaries? I think the reason is a routine consciousness of mortality. An ineffably sacramental nuance in paintings from the Dutch seventeenth century, which luxuriate in the ordinary existence of ordinary people, evokes the impermanence of human contentment. Never mind the explicitness of that time's memento mori, all the skulls and guttering candles. I am talking about an awareness that's invisible, but palpable, in Rembrandt's nights—his fatalistic self-portrait in the Frick Collection comes to mind. The peculiarly intense insouciance of a Boucher or a Fragonard—the sensuous frolics of France's ancien régime—protests, in favor of life, rather too much. Young folk dallying at court provide the sole but turbulent drama in "The Progress of Love," the museum's marvellous suite of Fragonard paintings. When we are again free to wander museums, the objects won't have altered, but we will have, and the casualties of the coronavirus will accompany us spectrally. Until, inevitably, we begin to forget, we will have been reminded of our oneness throughout the world and across time with all the living and the dead. (Guides to Boucher, Fragonard, and Rembrandt are available on the museum's Web site.)—*Peter Schjeldahl (frick.org)*

"Vida Americana"

The Whitney's thumpingly great show, subtitled "Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1924-1945," picks an overdue art-historical fight. The usual story revolves around young, often immigrant aesthetes striving to absorb European modernism. A triumphalist tale composed backward from its climax—the postwar success of Abstract Expressionism—it brushes aside the prevalence, in the thirties, of politically themed figurative art: social realism, more or less, which became ideologically toxic with the onset of the Cold War. What to do with the mighty legacy of the era's big three Mexican painters, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros? As little as possible has seemed the rule, despite the seminal influence of Orozco and Siqueiros on the young Jackson Pollock. But, with some two hundred works by sixty artists and abundant documentary material, the curator Barbara Haskell reweaves the sense and sensations of the time to bring it alive. Without the Mexican precedents of amplified scale and passionate vigor, the development of Abstract Expressionism lacks crucial sense. As for the politics, consider the persistently leftward tilt of American art culture ever since—a residual hankering, however sotto voce, to change the world. (The Whitney is temporarily closed, but a selection of the show's works and related videos is online.)—*P.S. (whitney.org)*

Rodney McMillian

The heft and tactility of this Los Angeles artist's tapestrylike pieces are not lost in the online edition of "Recirculating Goods," his first exhibition at the Petzel gallery. Crocheted blankets—some formerly owned by the artist's family and friends, others purchased in thrift stores—have been altered by applications of vibrant latex, transforming them into peculiarly American hybrids of landscape and Ab Ex. Some of these paintings incorporate price tags into their compositions. In "$7.99: a blue moon," a bright-yellow tab draws the eye up from the textile's earthy tangerine and rust stripes to a dark, paint-stiffened expanse: a night sky looming above a small turquoise circle. Other works conjure marshlands, storms, and lava flows. Throughout, McMillian makes canny formal use of the geometric patterning of the afghans; in their intimate, handcrafted aura, he finds a deft foil to the heroics of the abstract sublime, which he both celebrates and undermines.—*Johanna Fateman (petzel.com)*

Saul Steinberg

Titled "Imagined Interiors," this online exhibition, curated by Michaela Mohrmann, is a subtly Zeitgeist-y delight. (Steinberg is, of course, best known for his work with this magazine.) It includes an ink drawing, from 1949, of an elegant woman who is all dressed up with nowhere to go but her drafting table, where she sketches a horse as her other illustrations overflow onto the floor. Pets, those classic Steinbergian protagonists of the domestic, are portrayed in a handful of pieces; in a 1974 photograph of the artist in his studio, a black cat watches him intently. Among the charming multimedia flourishes here is a recording of William Carlos Williams reading "This Is Just to Say," which accompanies a grid of still-life images. (The poet recites, "I have eaten / the plums / that were in / the icebox"; the artist arranges the fruit near a violin.) A quote from Steinberg compares his visual lexicon to poetry, in which "common words are used in order to explain very complicated things."—*J.F. (pacegallery.com)*

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TELEVISION

Love Is Blind

An instant classic among quickie-wedding reality shows, this Netflix series is like "The Dating Game" extrapolated into a conceptual space where the vibes from "90 Day Fiancé," on TLC, resonate against those of "The Lobster," by Yorgos Lanthimos. Contestants court without knowing what their admirers look like. (The dates occur in a series of "pods," through which strangers share their hopes and dreams and pleasant banalities.) After about a business week, six affianced couples finally meet face to face and begin to careen toward the altar. At various moments, the show warrants comparison to an unfortunate improv exercise, a better "S.N.L." sketch, a decent bikini comedy, a Cassavetes screaming match, a treasure trove of raw anthropological data, and a cry for help. That "Love Is Blind" is morally offensive to human dignity is key to its artistic success. It's easy to imagine future seasons, a "Black Mirror" crossover episode, and an expansion of the formula into a speed-dating service whereby single people, dating blind, grope for meaning in the darkness.—*Troy Patterson*

Tiger King

The documentarians Eric Goode and Rebecca Chailkin tamed five years' worth of footage, new and found, into this outrageous and outrageously viewable seven-part true-crime Netflix series. The plot centers on the battle between the gay zookeeper Joe Exotic, an outsider artist with an ability to hold hostage many species—big cats, boyfriends and husbands, employees and documentarians—and Carole Baskin, the proprietor of Big Cat Rescue, a Florida animal sanctuary, who campaigns for the closure of Exotic's G.W. Zoo. Exotic is convinced that, in the nineties, Baskin murdered her husband and, perhaps, fed him to her tigers. She denies the accusations with a bemused grin while pretending to tolerate her current husband, Howard, who follows her around like a needy pet. There's a dark comedy in the documentary's elliptical form, and human suffering is dangled before the viewer like raw meat; one former animal handler has a missing forearm that goes, for an agonizing forty-eight minutes, unmentioned. Is the show a takedown of the libertarian ethos, a dispatch from the last frontier of white colonialism, a Trumpian fable? Maybe. "Tiger King" is prestige trash.—*Doreen St. Félix (Reviewed in our issue of 4/13/20.)*

DANCE

Hamburg Ballet

The American choreographer John Neumeier has been based in Germany since the seventies, first as the resident choreographer of the Hamburg Ballet, and, since 1996, as the ballet director of the Hamburg State Opera. He's known for a serious, psychologically driven style that is more popular in Germany than it is in the U.S., as well as for an elegant, spare aesthetic that feels distinctly European. His most famous ballet, at least in the States, is "Lady of the Camellias," based on the Dumas novel. But this week the Hamburg Ballet, made up of an impressive group of actor-dancers, will be showing Neumeier's 2003 work "Death in Venice" as part of a series of broadcasts available on its Web site. This tale of desire, inertia, and death, inspired by the Thomas Mann novella, feels newly urgent—and Mann's descriptions of a cholera epidemic in Venice even more so.—*Marina Harss (hamburgballett.de)*

The Joyce Theatre

The Chelsea-based Joyce Theatre, one of the city's principal venues for dance, has begun streaming works by companies who have performed there in the past or, in better circumstances, would have been performing there now. This week's "JoyceStream," running April 21-26, features the Trisha Brown Dance Company, currently marking its fiftieth year. On tap is a dance by Trisha Brown, "Groove and Countermove," from 2000. Like a free-flowing ribbon of movement, it ripples and twists alongside Dave Douglas's jazzy score. (A dancer once described the sensation of dancing it as being "like a Sunday afternoon.") Also showing is Burt Barr's impressionistic thirty-minute film "Aeros," about the creation of Brown's 1989 piece "Astral Convertible," in which dancers circulate within an industrial landscape conceived by Robert Rauschenberg.—*M.H. (joyce.org/engage/joycestream)*

PlayBAC

Each week, the Baryshnikov Arts Center offers a different video, never before released, from an archive of performances filmed in its theatres. For April 23-28, the selection is "Interface," an intriguing if not entirely convincing 2013 work, in which Rashaun Mitchell, joined by three other outstanding former Cunningham dancers, playfully experiments with interpersonal drama and exaggerated facial expressions. For May 7-12, the series will look back to a rare New York visit, in 2019, by Israel's Vertigo Dance Company. Its "One. One & One" is so earthy that the dancers roll in dirt.—*Brian Seibert (bacnyc.org)*

ON TELEVISION

ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE F. SCHOLZ

The exes Billy (Domhnall Gleeson) and Ruby (Merritt Wever), acting impetuously on a pact made when they were college sweethearts, exchange coded text messages and reunite as lovers on the run. He's a life-coaching guru in flight from a pyromaniacally self-destructive career move; she's a trained architect evading the constraints of the dullest yoga-mom domesticity. In New York, they rendezvous aboard an Amtrak superliner bound for Chicago and throw off sparks of lust, friendship, guile, bile, and regret. That their camaraderie is grounded in improvised mischief and prankish play helps to explain the couple's chemistry and the impulsivity of their absconsion, as well as to justify the fantasticality of the journey's turns. The excitement of **"Run,"** a half-hour series created by Vicky Jones for HBO, is in the elegance of its swift shifts from mirthful absurd caper (as when the couple thuddingly struggle to disrobe in a narrow sleeping car) to dreadfully absurd hard noir (as when Billy's business partner ruthlessly pursues her share of the spoils). It's a nice nightmare dramatizing a bottomless truth: you can't run away from yourself.—*Troy Patterson*

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HIP-HOP

ILLUSTRATION BY ANNA RUPPRECHT

The Seattle hip-hop duo **Shabazz Palaces** revels in abstractions, unpacking elastic rhymes over intergalactic beats with heady, modernist conviction. On the album "The Don of Diamond Dreams," Ishmael Butler and Tendai Maraire's spontaneity and irreverence for rap conventions feel particularly urgent; these experiments are malleable and resistant to form at a time when declarative statements on the current era seem futile. Instead, the group continues bludgeoning musical complacency with songs as equivocal as inkblot tests. "This is high art / I tear the form apart," Butler raps on "Chocolate Souffle." He engages in a conversation—albeit an ambiguous one—with contemporary hip-hop on "Wet," and dives headlong into a puddle of free jazz on "Reg Walks by the Looking Glass." But the surprise is the uncharacteristically concrete "Thanking the Girls"—an ode to Butler's daughters that unfolds over a static-filled, beautifully off-kilter soundscape.—*Julyssa Lopez*

(Re)Live Arts Streaming

In their new online series, New York Live Arts and its resident troupe, the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, have been sampling both the theatre's and the company's back catalogues, offering a different assortment each week. The lineup for April 23-30 includes a performance of Jones's "The Breathing Show," from 2000, a ninety-minute solo tour de force that juggles dance, music, and video with the choreographer's rich voice, thoughts, and breath. Miguel Gutierrez's "Age & Beauty, Part 3," from 2015, is a mid-career artist's meditation on aging and legacy. Balancing wistfulness with irreverence, a multigenerational cast addresses anxiety by running in circles and hanging in the air.—*B.S. (newyorkliverarts.org)*

MUSIC

Metropolitan Opera: "At-Home Gala"

OPERA The Metropolitan Opera doesn't draw upon its deep roster of talent for any old occasion; it typically saves the all-star parade for milestones like its centennial, in 1983, and its fiftieth anniversary at Lincoln Center, during the 2016-17 season. In these unprecedented times, New York's grandest opera company has called on dozens of its biggest names for a virtual gala, to be live-streamed on its Web site. The performers, who are connecting via Skype, include Renée Fleming (who's quarantining in Virginia), Anna Netrebko (Vienna), Jonas Kaufmann (Munich), Bryn Terfel (Wales), and Anita Rachvelishvili (Tbilisi, Georgia); Peter Gelb and Yannick Nézet-Séguin host this free event from their respective homes in New York City and Montreal.—*Oussama Zahr (April 25 at 1.)*

Wolfgang Muthspiel: "Angular Blues"

JAZZ They grow up so fast. It seems like just yesterday that a wave of compelling young jazz guitarists—Liberty Ellman, Kurt Rosenwinkel, and Wolfgang Muthspiel among them—was bringing new life to the instrument. Now those players are middle-aged, with a new crop of nimble plectrists snapping at their heels. But Muthspiel's "Angular Blues" proves that gifted improvisers can hit their stride in their autumn years. He doesn't let his agile fingers do all the thinking for him: his lines breathe rather than pant, particularly on the first three tracks, which feature acoustic guitar. Partnered with two receptive players—the drummer Brian Blade and the bassist Scott Colley—Muthspiel demonstrates his artistic maturity, but he still finds moments to loosen the reins, as on the aptly titled "Ride."—*Steve Futterman*

Ron Sexsmith: "Hermitage"

ROCK The veteran songwriter Ron Sexsmith specializes in fussy pop music that's happily marooned in the sixties, but his real genre may be "Canadian." Where American rock and roll was coughed up in a carnivalesque vein by demonic hillbillies shaking unmentionable body parts, Sexsmith's work embodies an exceedingly well-mannered sequel that arose after the music drifted up north. Even his breakup songs seem nice. All this politeness can enervate a listener, yet Sexsmith's albums have long demonstrated a writer's attentiveness—he published a novel, "Deer Life," in 2017—and "Hermitage" benefits from an understated grace. The record, Sexsmith's sixteenth, finds the musician uprooted from Toronto to more countrified environs. The strongest songs lean into their pastoral setting, with some pointing to the nonchalant albums that Paul McCartney issued early in his solo career and others to the wistful late-sixties work of the Kinks. Both lodestars were themselves fetishizing the past, which lends the backward gaze of "Hermitage" a subtle twist—nostalgia redux.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

Squarepusher: "Lamental"

I.D.M. The composer-producer Tom Jenkinson, who works as Squarepusher, has one of the most instantly recognizable styles in electronic dance music—simultaneously airy and hyperactive, with pretzel-like bass lines underpinning gleefully complex tunes. The album he released in January, "Be Up a Hello," balances that perfervid approach with more contemplative material; on his new EP, "Lamental," he focusses even more on his softer edge. The set ends with two versions of the same song, "Midi Sans Frontières," and the difference in tone between them—one is a pile driver, the other a soundtrack for stargazing—works as a lesson in both programming and arrangement.—*Michaelangelo Matos*

thingNY: "SubtracTTTTTTTTT"

OPERA In 2010, the riotously unpredictable musical performance-art troupe thingNY issued its début recording, "ADDDDDDDDD," an arresting hour-long gobstopper comprising fragmentary stories, bawdy and beguiling melodies, fake advertisements, and occasional profanity. (Fittingly, it was accompanied by a comic-book libretto.) A tenth-anniversary revival, planned for this month, was postponed indefinitely because of the pandemic. Instead, the ensemble of vocalists and instrumentalists—Gelsey Bell, Isabel Castellvi, Paul Pinto, Erin Rogers, Dave Ruder, and Jeffrey Young—fashioned a sequel, "SubtracTTTTTTTTT," to be presented live on the group's Web site, thingNY.com. The new piece is designed to exploit the capacities and pitfalls of live streaming and online conferencing among distanced participants. The performances are presented jointly with the MATA Festival (whose April programming was also cancelled) as part of its "MATA Continued" initiative, which supports the further adventures of festival alumni.—*Steve Smith (April 24-26 at 6.)*

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M. Ward: “Migration Stories”

FOLK On M. Ward’s tenth album, “Migration Stories,” the American singer-songwriter paints bucolic scenes marked by moon-filled skies, multicolored deserts, and sun-soaked pavement. The imagery reflects the folk traditions that M. Ward often evokes in his sound, but such panoramas also allow him to explore histories of migration and patterns of diaspora—concepts on this album that he says were inspired partly by his grandfather’s move from Durango, Mexico, to California decades ago. Ward goes on his own private journeys, travelling through time to revisit past generations on the dreamy “Migration of Souls” and finding a moment of solitude on “Real Silence.” With his sparse and expansive arrangements, he conveys movement at a time when the idea seems so distant.—*Julyssa Lopez*

MOVIES

Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice

In Paul Mazursky’s first feature, from 1969, the director distills the complex experience of the late nineteen-sixties, the tangle and clash of settled habits and sudden changes, into the dramatic comedy’s over-all mood and striking visual identity. It begins at an encounter session, where a married couple—Bob (Robert Culp), a documentary filmmaker, and Carol (Natalie Wood), a stay-at-home mother—break through their emotional repressions and unleash a storm of erotic chaos. When Bob admits to Carol that he’s had a fling with a young colleague, the fallout also roils the marriage of their best friends, Ted (Elliott Gould), an attorney, and Alice (Dyan Cannon), who’s also a stay-at-home mom. Within the riotous satire, Mazursky liberates a powerful, turbulent, and contradictory emotionalism, finding terrifying vulnerability in his characters’ confusion. The director guides his actors to performances of live-wire intensity; their agitated instability and febrile uncertainty burst the boundaries of theatrical precision to suggest his own inner conflicts.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Amazon, Vudu, and other services.)*

Ford v Ferrari

Cheerful, robust, and well oiled, the latest film by James Mangold fulfills the plain promise of its title. In the nineteen-sixties, Henry Ford II—played with gusto by Tracy Letts—decides to beat Ferrari at its own game by designing a car that will triumph at the twenty-four-hour race at Le Mans. This ludicrous plan is put into effect by Carroll Shelby (Matt Damon), the upbeat Texan who oversees the project, and Ken Miles (Christian Bale), the lugubrious British driver behind the wheel. Bright and gutsy though the racing sequences are, the movie is not really about automobiles; it’s a multiple-character study that happens to barrel along at high speed, and much fun is to be had from the clash of the various egos, fender to fender. With Caitriona Balfe as Ken’s wife, Mollie, who, true to the spirit of the story, takes no nonsense.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 11/18/19.) (Streaming on Amazon, iTunes, and other services.)*

Phyllis and Harold

Cindy Kleine looks behind the façade of suburban respectability to extract the pathos from her parents’ sixty-year marriage—and to display her own perspective as a witness and even as an accomplice. Growing up on the South Shore of Long Island, Cindy sensed that her parents, the New York-born children of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, didn’t live in marital bliss. Her father, Harold, a dentist, lived in a comfortable obliviousness; her mother, Phyllis, however, lived in torment, and tells the filmmaker, on camera, the reason: soon after her marriage, in the nineteen-forties, she had a five-year affair with a married man who was the love of her life. The pressure of real-time secrecy gives this documentary the tension of a thriller. In joint interviews with her parents that preserve the shattering secrets, and in separate ones that reveal them, as well as a generous and revelatory selection of home movies and stills (Harold was a camera buff), Kleine unfolds the price of a lifetime of secrecy and lies. Released in 2010.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon Prime and YouTube.)*

Talk to Me

Don Cheadle brings sharp humor and deep passion to his portrayal of the Washington, D.C., disk jockey and talk-show host Petey Greene in this historically vital and acute bio-pic, from 2007, directed by Kasi Lemmons. The action begins with Petey in prison, in 1966, where he hones his skills on the public-address system and gets himself released with a bold ploy. He then pressures Dewey Hughes (Chiwetel Ejiofor), the only black executive at a radio station catering to black audiences, to hire him; with his political frankness, personal candor, and scathing wit, Petey becomes an instant celebrity. His political commitment, as well as his civic devotion, is severely tested in the aftermath of the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Then, in the seventies, Dewey attempts to expand Petey’s fan base to television and to white viewers, putting their friendship—and Petey’s sense of self—at risk. Lemmons incisively dramatizes the massive media machinery that elides the painful experiences of black Americans—and the high price of resistance to it. With Taraji P. Henson, as Petey’s impulsive and insightful longtime partner.—*R.B. (Streaming on Amazon, Vudu, and other services.)*

WHAT TO STREAM

EVERETT

The Criterion Channel, a treasure trove of international cinema, is celebrating its one-year anniversary by ramping up its offerings of classic American movies with new sets of streaming releases devoted to film noir, Gary Cooper, and Jean Arthur, including Frank Capra’s romantic and didactic comedy **“You Can’t Take It with You,”** from 1938. Arthur plays Alice Sycamore, a secretary in a mighty investment bank, and Jimmy Stewart plays Tony Kirby, the firm’s heir apparent; they fall in love and plan to marry, but the families don’t mesh. Tony’s ruthless father (Edward Arnold) wants to buy twelve city blocks to crush a competitor, and Alice’s grandfather (Lionel Barrymore), the patriarch of a clan of eccentrics, is the sole holdout. Though much of the comedy blends forced gaiety with sentiment, Arthur and Stewart bring shivery intensity and playful intimacy to the young lovers’ ardent bond. Moreover, the Depression-era tale is a fascinating political hybrid, with its two-pronged preference for free-spirited whimsy over the accumulation of wealth, and for cottage industries over New Deal programs.—*Richard Brody*

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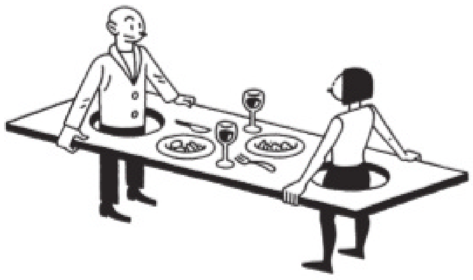

TABLES FOR TWO

Junzi Kitchen's Distance Dining

Last December, well before the pandemic, a Greenwich Village restaurant called Lucky Lee's closed, after less than a year in business. Its opening had been followed by deserved public outrage over its marketing campaign—Lucky Lee's proprietor, an influencer-type nutritionist, claimed that the restaurant's Chinese food was different from the rest in that it was "clean" and "healthified."

Chinese food has long been misunderstood in this country, and the coronavirus hasn't helped. Bigots have perpetuated an unsubstantiated claim that the virus arose from a wet market in Wuhan. "They have these markets where they were eating raw bats and snakes," said the Fox News anchor Jesse Watters on air. "They are very hungry people." Anti-Chinese sentiment is surging as our own President has assigned the virus a nationality. This troubles Lucas Sin, the chef at Junzi Kitchen, a fast-casual mini-chain that serves rice and noodle bowls and stuffed wraps known as *bings*, with three locations in Manhattan. In March, after New York's restaurants were ordered to close their dining rooms, Sin designed a tasting menu, available for pickup or delivery, entitled "Chinese Food Is Good for You," which included chicken broth perfumed with apricot kernel and red dates, and yams stewed in osmanthus tea.

It was the first in a series he's calling "Distance Dining: A Crisis Delivery Pop-Up." Before the shutdown, Sin, who grew up in Hong Kong, had been hosting ticketed dinners featuring elaborate seven-course meals that examined Chinese food culture and history. (For one, he re-created the famous meal that Nixon ate during his 1972 visit to Beijing.) The weekly "Distance Dining" dinners comprise a more manageable three courses, cooked but cold—to demonstrate how to heat each dish at home, Sin logs on to Instagram Live.

On a recent Friday night, I watched as he mixed a cocktail with gin and calamansi-flavored sparkling water. Sin had enlisted his colleague L. J. Almendras, Junzi's "food designer," who is Filipino, to collaborate on a menu that explored the culinary influence of Chinese immigrants on the Philippines. I dug my chopsticks into a tangle of *pancit palabok*—chewy rice noodles slick with shrimp-head sauce and laced with tender beech mushrooms, smoked herring, and chicharrónes—as Sin explained that the word *pancit*, which means "noodle" or "noodle dish" in Tagalog, comes from the Hokkien for "convenient food." Almendras suggested using a stovetop to heat the *arroz caldo*, a rice porridge they'd made with rooster stock, to get it boiling hot. The porridge's Spanish name is a reflection of centuries of forced European rule, but the dish had arrived by way of China: it was congee.

A week later, I gnawed on pork ribs in a black-bean-char-siu glaze, topped with a green mojo sauce that Sin had made with Junzi's Puerto Rican culinary director, Anthony Nichols. On Instagram, Sin pointed out, excitedly, that there's a fine line between mojo, which consists of cilantro or parsley chopped with garlic and salt in olive oil, and the ginger-scallion sauce often served with Chinese barbecue. Both chefs had grown up eating bread pudding, so it was an obvious choice for dessert, soaked in coconut cream and studded with golden raisins.

Because Junzi has investors and suppliers in China, Sin and his colleagues saw, to some degree, what was coming. "After a couple of weeks," Sin said, "people who are ordering food go a little crazy. It's less, 'Hey, I'm gonna help out my favorite restaurants because they're having a tough time,' and more, 'What's new?' Just because there's a crisis doesn't mean you can't cook creatively." Sin was ten years old in 2003, during the SARS epidemic, and the fact that his memories of the lockdown in Hong Kong are hazy, and even happy, makes him optimistic. In addition to offering "Distance Dining," plus an à-la-carte takeout menu, Junzi is delivering daily meals to health-care workers, funded by donations. In early March, Sin's parents suggested that he fly home, where things seemed safer. "I can't leave," he told them. "I have too much to do." *("Distance Dining" dinners $28.)*

—*Hannah Goldfield*

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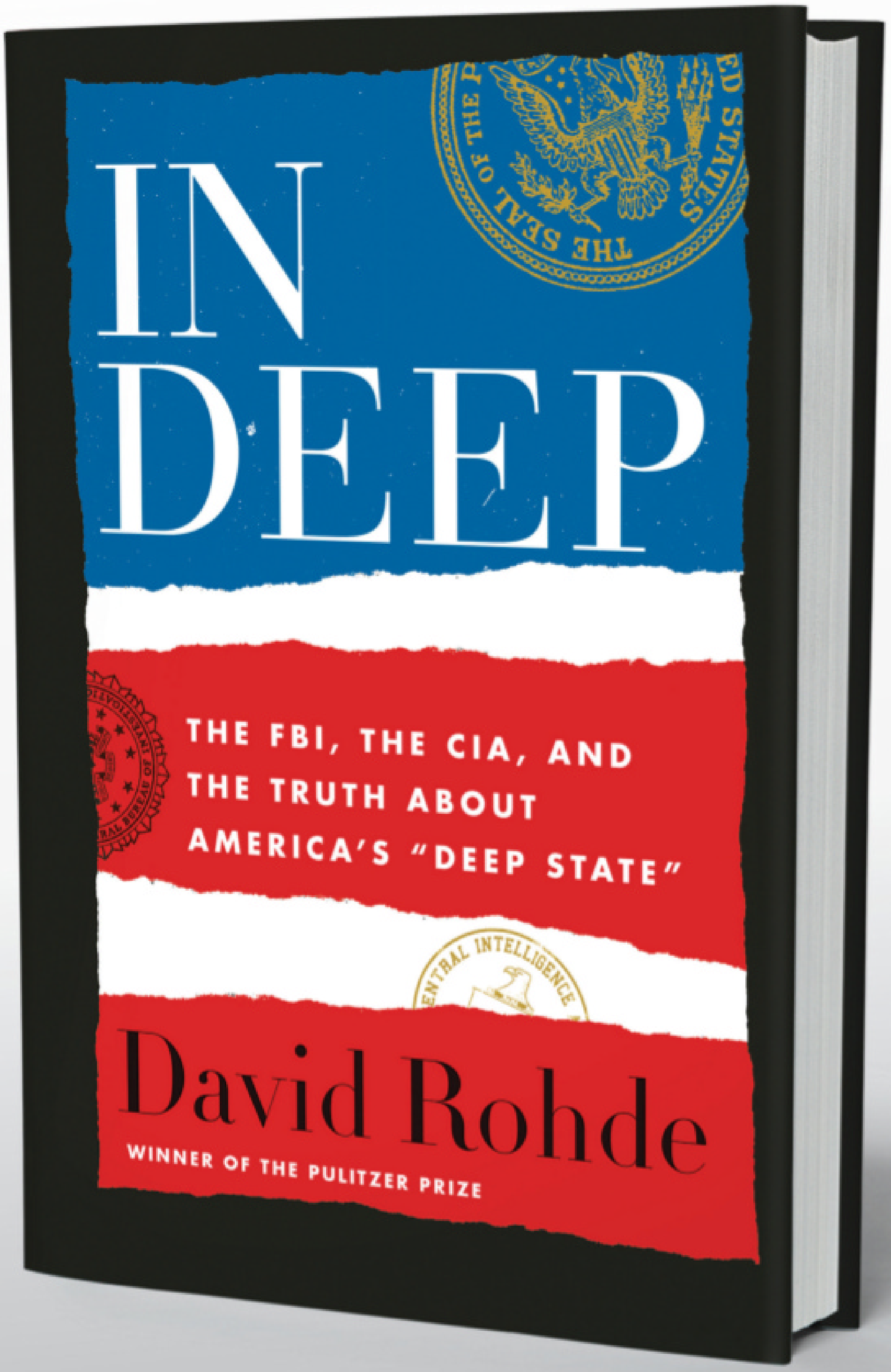
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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
WIDE WORLD

Last week, a flurry of widely shared articles noted that a number of countries deemed to be doing well in the fight against the novel coronavirus have something in common: they are led by women. Whether this observation is meaningful is hard to say; the countries in question are disproportionately small, wealthy, Scandinavian, and, not incidentally, providers of universal health care. But the idea had social-media appeal: could female leaders be, as the *Guardian* put it, the world's "secret weapon"? And, if so, why? Speculation ranged from the sociological (women have to be more competent in order to gain power) to the dubiously gendered (they are good at "love"). And there was some wistfulness: what if, at this juncture, there were a woman in the White House, and Donald Trump were ordering takeout while socially distancing in Trump Tower?

Such notions may be more emotionally satisfying than epidemiologically useful. But they speak to a longing for leadership and for secret weapons—any weapons—against COVID-19. As a shared experience, this crisis is unmatched in history. That is why Trump's decision, last week, to cut off support for the World Health Organization, despite its missteps, is so dismaying. Coupled with his calls, on Friday, to "liberate" certain states under stay-at-home orders, it marks an abandonment of responsibility. (China has not filled the vacuum internationally, in part because of questions about its transparency in managing the pandemic.) So it makes sense that we are frantically scanning the globe, trying to see who might be getting it right.

Some rough answers have emerged from Europe and Asia. Testing is crucial, as South Korea has shown; so is public trust. Social distancing flattens the curve, and, the more testing a nation does, the more options it has for how to maintain that distance, from the blunt tool of lockdowns, which Italy belatedly employed, to the nuanced tracking that South Korea has pioneered. Masks help. At the same time, the pandemic seems to exacerbate national pathologies, from Hungary's turn from democracy to Egypt's silencing of critics. Women everywhere are contending with a surge in domestic violence; France and Spain have introduced code words that they can use to seek help.

President Jair Bolsonaro, of Brazil, has decried distancing measures and pushed coronavirus conspiracy theories. (There are plenty of those around the world.) In response, the minister of health, Luiz Mandetta, has played the role of an unbound Anthony Fauci, backing governors who ordered closures in their states. Bolsonaro fired Mandetta last Thursday, but the President is increasingly unpopular; when other political leaders speak out, the bubble of delusion can be burst. Pandemics can have electoral consequences, too: South Korea's government won a resounding victory last week—and it insured that the turnout was large and safe, with special poll hours for people in quarantine.

The virus is only now beginning to take hold in many developing countries—where masks, ventilators, and even clean water can be desperately scarce—but they are already feeling its economic effects. One is a sudden lack of remittances from nationals working abroad. These account for about a fifth of El Salvador's G.D.P. and a quarter of Somalia's. When a waitress or a shopkeeper in Paris or Queens loses income, money stops going to Senegal or Nepal. Many families in Afghanistan's Herat Province rely on income from Iran; when Iran's economy seized up, a hundred and fifty thousand workers crossed back into Herat, some bringing the infection with them. The fate of refugees and migrants is one of the most wrenching questions of the crisis, illustrated in images of evicted African workers sleeping on the streets of Guangzhou, and in accounts of Kenyan workers returning from the Gulf States to face a curfew that has become an engine of police brutality.

India, with a population of more than 1.3 billion, shows how the pandemic can

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

be a source of both unity and dangerous discord. Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for the entire nation to join together in cheering health workers on March 22nd, at 5 P.M.—all India is in one time zone—and it did. Yet the country's early coverage of the outbreak focussed on clusters in the Muslim community, against whom the B.J.P., Modi's party, has incited violence. And, when Modi effectively shut down the country, migrant workers had little warning. A stream of people, by many estimates hundreds of thousands of them, began walking, often hundreds of miles, to their home villages. Others remained in cities. Last week, Mumbai had at least two thousand confirmed cases; it is both a financial capital and a metropolis whose slums epidemiologists view with apprehension, compounded there, as elsewhere, by a lack of reliable data. There are similar fears for Lagos, Nigeria, a city of more than twenty million people, which had two hundred and fifty cases by the end of last week. (And, for that matter, for Moscow, where, last week, there were eighteen thousand cases.) Resources matter, but scientists can, as yet, only hazard a guess as to precisely how those countries, and far poorer ones, will experience COVID-19. Will the relative youth of their populations provide a buffer? Will high rates of tuberculosis and H.I.V.—a particular factor in South Africa, where cases are rising steadily—make the toll worse?

Alyssa Ayres, of the Council on Foreign Relations, noted that one of the Indian states that has had the most success in fighting COVID-19 is Kerala, which is home to about thirty-five million people. Kerala is not governed by the B.J.P. but by a coalition of leftist parties, and has long been distinguished by its well-functioning health system. The state's health minister, K. K. Shailaja, a woman being called the Coronavirus Slayer, mounted an early and aggressive response. Kerala was also helped by having had, in effect, a rehearsal—in 2018, it managed an outbreak of the Nipah virus, which can attack the brain. There is a parallel story in Bangladesh, which has been able to draw on public-health capacities it has built up, over several decades, to fight cholera. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the former President of Liberia, in a call for concerted action to counter COVID-19, invoked the lessons that African countries had learned from the Ebola epidemic. As Ayres put it, "There is deep expertise in places that most Americans aren't thinking about."

That may be one of the most important messages from the wider world. The struggle to control the pandemic has to be a joint project, as if the whole planet were seeking to reach the moon together. Every nation can contribute, including those whose voices are less often heard. And no one can be left behind.

—*Amy Davidson Sorkin*

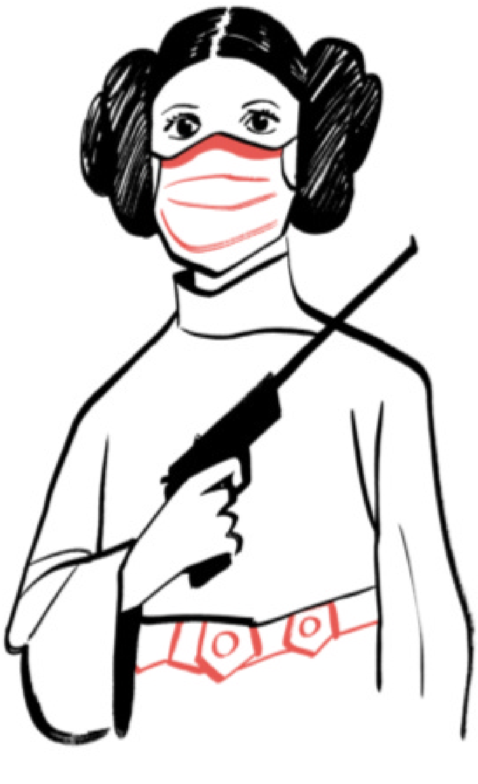
PITCHING IN
GOLDEN NEEDLES

In the pandemic economy, face masks are like bars of gold. Hoarders are hoarding them. Governors are bartering for them. Hospital workers desperately need them. New Yorkers, ordered by Governor Cuomo last week to cover their faces in public, are repurposing bandannas and boxer shorts. In Rosie the Riveter fashion, Americans with crafting skills—among them quilters, Broadway seamstresses, sportswear manufacturers, origami artists, and grandmothers—have sprung into action. But one group has special mask-making powers: cosplayers, the superfans who specialize in making and wearing costumes. Never has the ability to whip up a Spider-Man mask or a Stormtrooper helmet been so useful.

"Cosplayers have big hearts," Monica Paprocki, a thirty-five-year-old accountant in Chicago, said. Paprocki, who runs the fandom site Geeks A Gogo, started cosplaying in 2014 and taught herself how to sew by watching YouTube videos. She dressed as Princess Jasmine at Wizard World Chicago in 2019, the year after her Phoenix Monster costume, from the board game Rising Sun, won the Golden Needle Award at a gaming convention in Indianapolis. "It had articulated wings that I controlled with a remote control," she said. This June, she was going to dress as Buzz Lightyear at the Origins Game Fair, in Ohio, but it has been postponed until October. When she saw a Facebook group requesting homemade medical supplies, she recruited fellow-cosplayers. "Before everything closed down, I had a stash of cotton fabric and materials here in my house," she said. "I work my regular nine-to-five job in accounting. Right after that, I start sewing."

One of her cosplaying friends, Bryan Martinez, said, "Cosplayers are people with a lot of anxiety. We like to always be making things." (He mentioned "con crunch," a term for the pre-convention costuming rush.) Martinez, an illustrator who lives in the Bronx, got into cosplaying five years ago, when he went to New York Comic Con in a store-bought Assassin's Creed outfit. He taught himself to sew and returned, in 2018, as the Marvel villain Corvus Glaive, placing third in the FX competition. He was supposed to go to a convention in Philadelphia this month, to sell handmade "Sailor Moon" tote bags, but he repurposed the fabric to make masks for NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital. (Homemade masks can't substitute for disposable medical masks, but they can prolong the use of medical masks if worn as a second layer.) "I am trying to get to forty or fifty," he said. "I'll keep going till I run out of materials."

In Washington State, the hospital chain Providence put out a call for masks. "Cosplayers picked up on it right away and were, like, 'Boom! Let's do this,'" Brian Morris, who lives in Renton, said.



Morris is the C.E.O. of KingCon Northwest, which draws some three thousand attendees, and runs a made-to-order-costume shop called Zaklabs. "Most people, when they think of cosplayers, are, like, 'Oh, those funny people who dress up in those weird costumes,'" he said. "But they have this incredible set of skills." He was planning to live-stream a mask-making tutorial that night. Fun patterns are a plus. Renee Spencer, a cosplayer from Snohomish County, had planned to attend Seattle's Emerald City Comic Con (now postponed), where she has appeared as the Marvel heroine Jean Grey, but is now making masks with leftovers from the character's trademark yellow sash. "I dropped two off already to my acupuncturist," she said.

Anne Bonovich, in suburban Illinois, goes to conventions with her husband and kids. "We're a big geek family," she said. At Star Wars Celebration last year, in Chicago, they went as Hogwarts students with Jedi lightsabres. Bonovich has converted her basement into a mask-making shop, using "Game of Thrones" and "Star Wars" fabric, and is delivering masks to friends who work in emergency rooms. "There's an elastic shortage everywhere, so we're finding alternatives," she said. "My daughter donated forty of her scrunchies." Abi Gardner, a graphic designer and sometime Wonder Woman, had plenty of elastic, she said, "because I usually use it for bowstrings. I had a bowstring for Princess Merida, from 'Brave.' Cons don't let you have real bowstrings, so elastic works really well."

Under the circumstances, it seemed sensible to ask: Which superhero could best fight the coronavirus? Paprocki suggested the Invisible Woman, one of the Fantastic Four, whose force-field powers "can shield people from the virus." Bonovich proposed Professor Xavier, from "X-Men," "because he can use his mind to tell everybody to stay home, wash their hands, and chill out." Spencer voted for the Marvel heroine Rogue, whose powers preclude her from touching people, thereby making her "the queen of social distancing." The Atom, Morris said, could shrink himself to germ size and "fight 'em hand to hand." Martinez chose Doctor Strange, because he's a medical professional, and because he can turn back time.

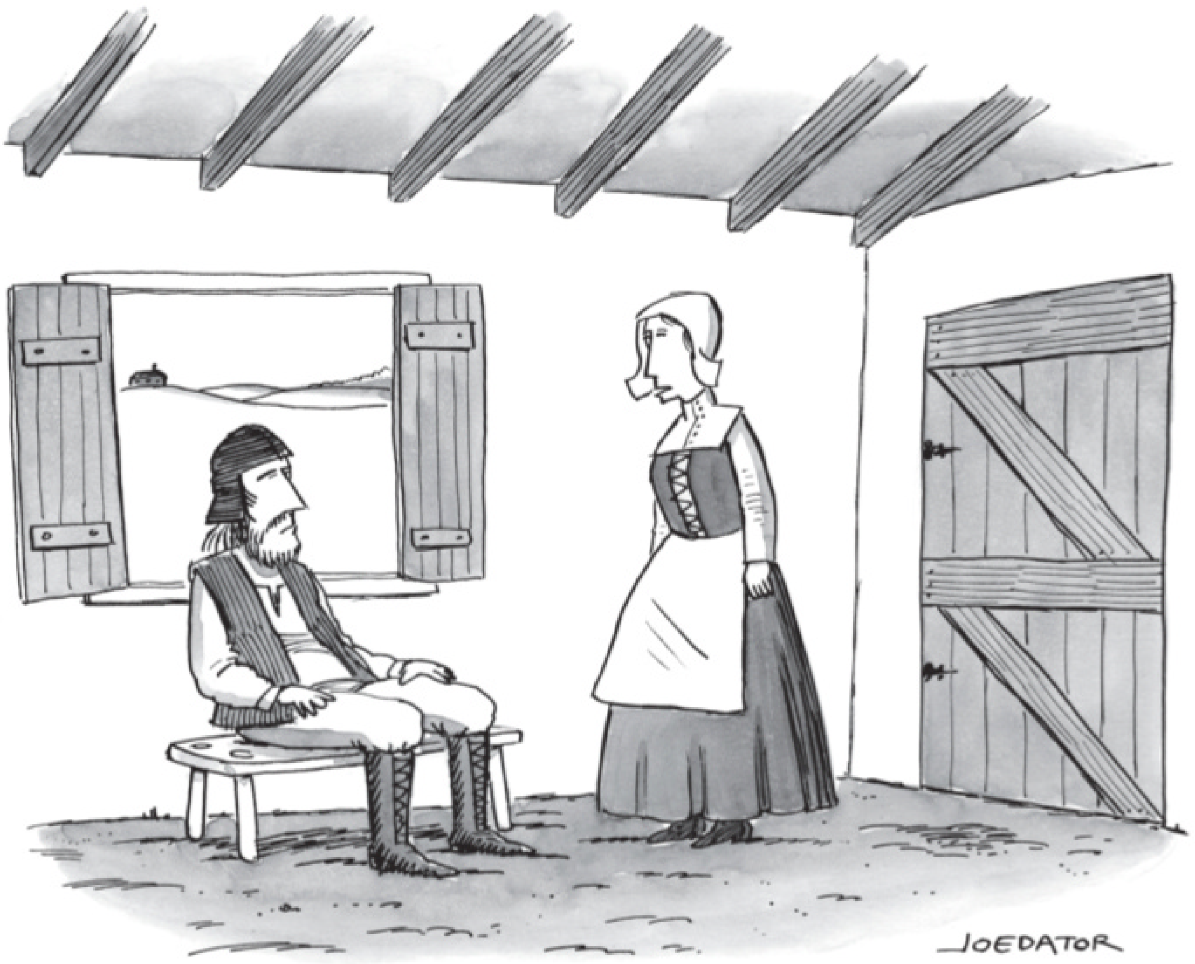
—Michael Schulman

MODENA POSTCARD
BÉCHAMEL HERO

Scene: Italy, COVID-19 lockdown, Night One. A family outside Modena wonders what to do for dinner. Mom stares into fridge. Dad scarfs down pistachios. Son nukes something in microwave. Daughter looks up from phone, shakes head. Lo and behold, her light-bulb moment: a cooking show for the quarantined, by the quarantined. How to do it? Whom to pitch? Netflix, Apple, Disney+? Another idea: FaceTime a focus group, to test the concept. "I filmed my dad making some food," Alexa Bottura, who is twenty-three, said recently. The response: More, please. "I was, like, if my friends who are in their early twenties are into it—they're bored, they don't know what they're doing, but they want to know what my dad is doing—I wonder what regular people would think."

"Kitchen Quarantine" stars Alexa's dad, Massimo, the chef of the three-Michelin-starred Osteria Francescana, in Modena. It airs nightly on Instagram. Its team is lean (Alexa: director, executive producer, camerawoman; also, recently furloughed Maserati employee), its airtime is approximate (around 8 P.M.), and its format is as malleable as a mound of pizza dough. An episode can run twenty minutes or forty-five, begin in Italian and end in English, offer instructions on how to start a béchamel sauce (step one: heat butter and flour in a pan), or include a request for donations (to buy an ambulance for the city). The constants: food, conviviality, and a plea to viewers to wash their hands. Each episode garners a live audience of about three thousand (more watch archived versions later); real-time feedback comes as a stream of emoji (mostly hearts), comments ("That's a lot of olive oil"), and questions ("Can I be quarantined with Massimo, please?").

"It's not a master class, it's not a cooking show, it's just us, making dinner," Lara, Massimo's wife, said. She wore a tan bathrobe and sat at a dining table, which had just been cleared of the latest episode's spoils: tubular pasta sauced with heirloom tomatoes, asparagus, and Luganica sausage; a cheesecake topped with raspberries and a balsamic-vinegar reduction. "We're a restaurant family. We don't do this. We never really know what



"Good news—Shakespeare is using this time to write 'King Lear,' so we'll have more stuff to binge soon."

Massimo is going to cook, or what mood Charlie”—their nineteen-year-old son, who is autistic—“is going to be in.” She added, “If you can get something out of it, or an inspiration to use an ingredient in your fridge in a different way—that’s all we want.” But an increased kitchen I.Q. couldn’t hurt. “Half a million people watched the video on how to make béchamel,” Massimo said. “Come on! It’s the most basic sauce you can make.”

Low on supplies, one recent Friday, Massimo and Alexa made their weekly trip to Modena’s Mercato Albinelli, a cavernous, eighty-eight-year-old market with dozens of venders. A correspondent in Los Angeles joined them via WhatsApp. “To leave the house only when you really need to, it’s the only way to stop this virus,” Massimo said. He wore a face mask and a Gucci scarf. Alexa said, “We had the big shopping craze a couple of weeks ago. Now everyone has definitely calmed down.” She wore a face mask and a white hoodie. “There’s plenty of toilet paper.”

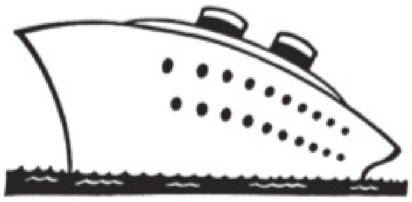
“One, two, three,” other shoppers, Massimo counted. He approached a crate of purple artichokes. “Look, how beautiful,” he said, reaching out his hand. A rubber-gloved worker reprimanded him. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Massimo said. “I’m used to touching.” The worker bagged carrots, celery, limes, and avocados. “People really enjoyed the guacamole we did,” Massimo said. He and Alexa passed lemons the size of footballs. “We’re going to buy some pancetta, glaze it with balsamic vinegar, serve it with shaved Parmigiano. It would be great to add—let’s get raspberries,” he said. Also: potatoes. “Obviously, you need to have in the home some potatoes.” Mozzarella came from a cheesemonger wearing blue rubber gloves. Massimo sampled a ribbon of prosciutto proffered by another gloved hand, nodded, paid in cash. A butcher lowered his mask to holler, “You’re Massimo!”

Alexa and Massimo Bottura

“*Si!*” the chef shouted back. Alexa watched a butcher break down a chicken from behind a strip of yellow caution tape. “We’re going to put the chicken in the freezer and use it to make broth,” Massimo said. “Generally, the broth has been from Francescana,” which, like his twelve other outposts around the world, was closed indefinitely. (The exception: his Milan *refettorio*, “the only soup kitchen open in Milan,” he said. He dispatched the employees of his newest restaurant, Gucci Osteria, in Beverly Hills, to a soup kitchen on Skid Row.) Father and daughter looped back to the vegetable vender to pick up their bags. “We’re done,” Massimo said. Time check: thirty-four minutes. They emerged into the sun. “Usually this piazza is packed,” Massimo said. “Now, no one.” He noted two officers stationed near a bell tower, to ensure “that no people are that close to each other.” He took in the square: pigeons, a cloudless blue sky. “This is surreal,” he said. “Sur-*real*.”

—*Sheila Marikar*

SHIPSHAPE
AFLOAT



The U.S.N.S. Comfort, the massive hospital ship that has been docked at Pier 90 for the past three weeks, deploys only for major missions: combat (Persian Gulf, 2002) and disaster relief (Haiti, earthquake, 2010). Between calls, a small crew primes the equipment and monitors the expiration date on supplies. The ship maintains a status of “ready five”—the capacity to mobilize within five days. Several weeks ago, as New York’s COVID-19 caseload ballooned into the thousands, the city requested backup: the hospitals, increasingly overwhelmed, needed somewhere to treat patients who were suffering from illnesses other than the coronavirus. The Comfort had a thousand beds, and a large health-care staff and crew. “This is like adding a whole other hospital,” Mayor Bill de Blasio declared, at Pier 90, shortly after the ship arrived. Behind him loomed the Comfort, with enormous red crosses painted on its bright-white hull. The crosses are meant to discourage enemy fire—it’s a war crime to attack a hospital ship—but they are also a symbol of rescue. De Blasio said, “Help has come.”

But had it? By April 2nd, the ship’s fourth day in port, a mere three patients had been treated. (The first had boarded on the afternoon of April 1st: an older woman, in acute renal distress.) The slow start left the ship’s wards, blood bank, radiology unit, CAT scanner, and twelve operating rooms largely unused. A local hospital administrator called the Comfort “a joke.” Joseph O’Brien, one of the ship’s captains, said that expectations of immediate “full capacity” were unrealistic. O’Brien, a helicopter pilot, who has also commanded humanitarian missions, noted, “It takes a little bit of time to get a rhythm, to get all the processes in place.” By April 6th, the Comfort had treated forty-two patients. Governor Andrew Cuomo asked the federal government to allow the ship to accept COVID cases. The White House granted the request, and the crew quickly reconfigured the space, cutting the bed capacity almost in half. It helped that the Comfort was built as an oil tanker: belowdecks, its highly compartmentalized design benefits the kind of isolation necessary for controlling infection. The medical staff and crew move among the seven main zones by walking up and over, as opposed to passing through the interior.

Normally, the crew cleans twice a day; now twelve sailors are disinfecting handrails and doorknobs once an hour. O’Brien said, “If I see someone standing still, they’d better have a Clorox wipe in their hand.” Before the Comfort admitted its first COVID patient, a crew member tested positive for the coronavirus. Most of the medical personnel were moved off the ship and into a nearby hotel. (They have no shore liberties; they are bused to and from work.) O’Brien’s stateroom had become his office. He had mounted his Cannondale CAAD10, the bike that he usually rides to work, in Virginia, onto a stationary computrainer. The crew—more than twelve hundred people—had expected, as he put it, to “live, eat, and breathe" on board for months.

The last time the Comfort got an S.O.S. from New York was on 9/11. With few survivors at the World Trade Center, the Comfort attended to first responders. For three weeks, the medical staff treated more than a thousand people—cuts, fractures, trouble breathing, emotional distress. Beds were provided for workers who had been sleeping on the street between shifts at Ground Zero. Cops and firefighters were invited on board for a hot breakfast. (One officer said, "We don't get treated like this unless it's Thanksgiving or Christmas.") Massage therapists gave more than thirteen hundred massages. Supply officers replaced ripped clothing and boots. When the Comfort sailed out of New York, the ship's Navy and Marine Corps crew lined the railings, wearing N.Y.P.D. and F.D.N.Y. caps.

Nineteen years later, a new crew lined the railings for the voyage in. Tom Von Essen, the fire commissioner during 9/11, who is now an administrator for FEMA working on COVID, said that on his way to greet the Comfort, for the second time, he had a flashback to 9/11. "The grief, of course, was enormous, but the operation seemed to get slightly better every day," he recalled. "With this," he added, "we're not there yet."

The Comfort's patient load reached a hundred and forty-six last week, including ninety COVID cases. Three more of the ship's personnel had contracted the virus. (All recovered.) Nineteen of the ninety-five ventilators on board were in use. The medical team had performed more than fifty surgical procedures, and had used its dialysis machine for the first time. The Comfort was learning that the fight changed constantly, a fact the city already knew.

—*Paige Williams*

KEEP THE FAITH DEPT.

MAGGID LANTERN

New Yorkers of a certain vintage might recall the witty Manhattan Mini Storage billboards that, appearing in the heart of the "Sex and the City" era, gave a boom-time upgrade to the city's normal grousing. "I loved 'NYC: Tolerant of your beliefs, judgmental of your shoes,'" Archie Gottesman, who co-wrote the ads, said on the phone. So when, three years ago, she left Manhattan Mini Storage (her family's company) to find fresh pasture for her branding skills, it seemed natural to focus on the urbane kvetching of a different tribe.

"I was, like, Ugh, why isn't Judaism, this religion that's so full of wisdom, so full of smart values, *selling* itself better?" she recalled. Her rebrand begat a Website venture, JewBelong, with its own hip sloganeering ("Imagine your cell phone battery was on 6% and lasted 8 days. That's Hanukkah!"), and, for holidays such as Passover, do-it-yourself guidelines based on Gottesman's own, sometimes unorthodox practice. "They have this Fireball whiskey that tastes like cinnamon, and we play where, every time you hear the name Moses, you take a shot," she said. "It's the burning bush!" (See also: a Red Sea centerpiece made of Jell-O.) The campaign has not been without controversy, and last year an especially daring ad—"Even if you think kugel is an exercise for your vagina . . . JewBelong"—inspired a conservative vandal to spray-paint over "for your vagina" on the sides of Upper West Side phone kiosks. Portnoy lives.

The other day, as Jews of the old, square cast broke square matzo in squarish Zoom windows, JewBelong moved its Seder operations online with an eye to greater meshugas and scale. Fourteen hundred screens had tuned in. Gottesman got two of her friends, the actress Alysia Reiner and the former magazine editor Joanna Coles, to co-host (Reiner: Jewish; Coles: down with the cause), and they pulled together a highfalutin guest list. At 7:04 P.M., Gottesman appeared onscreen wearing silver hoop earrings and her white hair in a ponytail. "I can't see you guys," she said. "But we have lots of fun in store—including Venmo cash prizes for finding the afikoman!"

The night's text was JewBelong's own, a Haggadah with sans-serif type and festive songs written to familiar tunes. Some readings were self-recorded, then edited together into a multivocal patchwork; others were done solo, via Webcam. Dan Bucatinsky, the "Scandal" actor, started with a blessing. "May everyone who shares in a Jewish life feel welcome and integrated," he said, speaking from a red-painted room, with all the curtains drawn.

"Hi, everybody, it's Cory Booker," the New Jersey senator (also down with the cause), said, appearing onscreen, in a kitchen. He was wearing a pin-striped suit, the jacket buttoned at the waist, and a red tie. "I've had long experience taking part in Passover Seders," he went on. "This idea of escaping slavery—how powerful it was for my ancestors who were slaves."

"Now is the time that we describe the Seder plate," said Reiner, coming onscreen with her daughter and her husband, and sitting in front of a painting of the ocean. Food had presented a challenge for most Zooming Jews; a Seder requires specific items, but shop closures had made some hard to acquire. Reiner mixed salt water in a wineglass. "In doing this with intention, it becomes more than salt water; it becomes the memory of sweat and tears," she said, swirling it like a Cabernet. Her family walked distant viewers through the offerings, adding optional signifiers. "The orange," Reiner said, holding an orange, "is a symbol of fruitfulness and love and inclusion of our L.G.B.T.Q.-plus friends."

Five comedians narrated part of the Maggid, the story of the Jews' passage from Egypt to Israel, in tag-team patter. (Rick Crom: "God is, like, 'Look, first of all, I hate to break it to you, but you're a Jew.'" Judy Gold: "Matzo! Unleavened bread! *Constipation*.") David Simon, the creator of "The Wire," appeared and, sombre, helped lead a Dayenu thankfulness prayer. Then Coles, in a red blouse and a white blazer, poured wine for Elijah. "Elijah's not here, so I may drink his as well as my own," she said. "We must all contribute our best talents and energies to help fulfill Elijah's promise of a peaceful world." A comment feed from viewers ran alongside the video. "I have never drunk so much so quickly," someone wrote.

Offline, Gottesman explained, "We really try our best not to Jewbarrass anyone"—her term for Jews (and non-Jews) being made to feel sheepish for not knowing the rules. She herself had been compelled to get creative with the zeroa, the shank bone included in the Seder. "Alysia found a raccoon bone in the road, and I'm, like, Perfect," she said. "I mean, this is COVID time. This is *our* plague, but we are going to get through it."

—*Nathan Heller*

OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

THE LONGEST SHIFT

In Queens, a new doctor faces the coronavirus pandemic.

BY RIVKA GALCHEN

Hashem Zikry specialized in emergency medicine "for times like this," he said.

Early in the coronavirus crisis, before New York shut down and the schools closed, when people still shared opinions about Marie Kondo and the timing of the Iowa caucuses, Elmhurst Hospital, in Queens, began rearranging its emergency room. The section for less acutely ill patients became a screening room for patients with symptoms of COVID-19. Within days, a new wall had been built. The critical-care area was doubled, then tripled. A triage tent soon went up outside. And the family room—where doctors and families can have difficult conversations in relative privacy—was turned into a place for the distribution of personal protective equipment, a transition from a "cold zone" to a "hot zone." "You walk into your shift and are handed a bag with your P.P.E. for the day, like it's your lunch box when you show up to school," Hashem Zikry, an E.R. doctor, told me, adding, "It's a little bit surreal. We all have perspective for a moment on how truly insane what's going on is. That our life is picking up this P.P.E. and changing into it, and that everyone out there is so sick."

At the beginning of a recent shift at Elmhurst, Zikry took over the care of a forty-five-year-old man who had a wife and four children. Although the man was on high levels of oxygen, he was short of breath. He had written out several paragraphs in Spanish specifying that he did not want to be intubated or resuscitated. "Normally, I don't push back on that too much, because I think people don't understand the futility of those efforts in most cases," Zikry said. "I pushed back on him, though. Because he was only forty-five." The man reiterated his wishes. "When he came in, he was well enough to speak in full sentences," Zikry said. "Two hours later, when he was at the point where we would have intubated him, I asked him again." Too breathless to speak, the patient shook his head; he was resolute. Zikry called the man's wife, who said that she trusted her husband to decide. "It was a horrendous shift," Zikry said. "So many people were dying." The man was visibly in agony, as is every patient struggling for air. Zikry and other doctors tried to help him find positions that might let more air into his lungs. The man rolled and bucked; eventually, he was still. By the end of the shift, he was dead. Zikry called the wife again. She didn't shout; she thanked him and the other doctors and nurses. "It was very hard to hear someone thank you for standing there and watching her husband die," Zikry said. "I felt very helpless."

Zikry has been working as a doctor for nine months. He is twenty-nine years old, an intern in the emergency-medicine residency program at Mount Sinai Hospital. As part of his training, he rotates through different hospitals and specialties. In late February, he began a six-week rotation in the E.R. at Elmhurst Hospital, a place he loves and describes as the soul of medicine. The neighborhood around the hospital is one of the most diverse on the planet. Nearby blocks are crowded with Thai noodle shops, Colombian bakeries, and groceries that sell lotus and taro root. The neighborhood, which has a large working-class immigrant population, was hit earlier and harder by the pandemic than most of the rest of the city. "It's become very clear to me what a socioeconomic disease this is," Zikry told me. "People hear that term 'essential workers.' Short-order cooks, doormen, cleaners, deli workers—that is the patient population here. Other people were at home, but my patients were still working. A few weeks ago, when they were told to socially isolate, they still had to go back to an apartment with ten other people. Now they are in our cardiac room dying." Zikry, whom I have spoken to regularly in the past month, has extraordinary resilience and

REDUX

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRYAN ANSELM

good humor; on this day, he sounded despondent. "After my shift, I went for a run in Central Park, and I see these two women out in, like, full hazmat suits, basically, and gloves, screaming at people to keep six feet away while they're power walking. And I'm thinking, You know what, you're not the ones who are at risk."

Before Zikry went to medical school, he had been in an E.R. only once. When he was thirteen, he shut his front door on his left middle finger. There was so much blood that his mother almost fainted, and Zikry remembers going to the E.R. with his younger brother. An orthopedic surgeon said that there was nothing to be done—he would lose the finger. By then, his mom had arrived, "like a mother on a mission," and she said, "My son is a pianist, don't tell me there's nothing to be done!" A plastic surgeon was brought in—Jess Ting, who had studied music at Juilliard. Zikry had never played piano in his life. He told Ting that his parents were the worst people in the world, and liars. ("I was very . . . hormonal.") Zikry recalled, "Then Ting said to me—and he became my mentor, he's the one who kept encouraging me to go to medical school over the years—'Well, I'm here now, let's see if I can help.'"

Zikry went to Hamilton College, where he studied English and ran cross-country, before going to Mount Sinai's Icahn Medical School. He loves Jane Austen. He still reads before bed, and trains for and runs marathons—his favorite is Grandma's Marathon, in Minnesota. Through the majority of the pandemic, Zikry worked an average of six days a week at Elmhurst. His shifts often lasted thirteen hours, an exhausting schedule that is typical for a first-year physician.

Even after New York's schools were closed, on March 16th, many hospitals in the city were at the eerie stage of preparing and waiting for a surge in COVID patients. "I would say our E.R. looks, well, more orderly than usual," Jolion McGreevy, who directs Mount Sinai Hospital's E.R., told me, on March 18th. Elaine Rabin, the head of the hospital's emergency-medicine residency program, recalled being an intern during 9/11, and said, "This is different from that. It very much feels like a tsunami is about to hit us." But, for the time being, the patient volume at Sinai was down. The non-corona cases—the broken bones, the belly pains, even the chest pains—were not turning up in their usual numbers. (Telemedicine had off-loaded some of those patients, but people were also afraid of the hospital, as evidenced later in the dramatic increase of deaths at home.) Elmhurst Hospital, however, was already four people deep into its sick-call list for staffing. It had many COVID patients, but they were accompanied by the usual load of "normal" cases. "The drunk falls, the chest pains—those numbers have been inelastic here," Zikry told me, in late March.

The P.P.E. bags that Elmhurst doctors received at the start of their shifts contained a papery yellow gown, blue gloves, a face shield, and an N95 mask. The mask had to suffice for a whole day, although as recently as February the C.D.C. recommended putting on a new one for each patient. An N95 mask fits the face more tightly than a regular surgical mask, and has a metal strip on top to hold it in place. "The bridge of my nose is bleeding from wearing it all day," Zikry told me. "I tried to MacGyver it with a Band-Aid, but it's not working." The P.P.E. that E.R. doctors in New York have been wearing more closely resembles a poor man's welding gear than the astronaut-like outfits seen in photos of medical workers in South Korea.

When Zikry came on shift on the evening of March 21st, one of the COVID patients signed out to his team seemed not as sick as some of the others he'd seen. "He walked by the desk during sign-out," Zikry told me. "He walked by again fifteen minutes later. Asked us where the bathroom was. He was walking—that's a great sign. Talking—that's a great sign. These are very reassuring things to a physician. I wrote down, 'Ambulatory, Conversant.'" A short time later, a hospital police officer approached Zikry to say that a man had collapsed in the bathroom. When Zikry reached him, the man had no pulse. He began chest compressions. "Nothing like this had ever happened to me," Zikry said. "I had seen him walking minutes before." The man was taken on a stretcher to the critical-care area, where resuscitation equipment was on hand. Despite the efforts of Zikry and others, the patient died about fifteen minutes later. Zikry recalled turning back toward the rest of the E.R. He said, "We look back on this sea of, like, three hundred people that expected us to treat them immediately, to figure out what was wrong with them." This was around 3:15 A.M.

Zikry had been in the middle of a presentation—describing to a team of providers how a different patient was doing, so that they could make a plan for care. "I had to pick up in the middle of that conversation as if it had been about a basketball game the night before," he said.

That day, a headline in the Washington *Post* read "IN HARD-HIT AREAS, TESTING RESTRICTED TO HEALTH CARE WORKERS, HOSPITAL PATIENTS." Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said, "When you go in and get tested, you are consuming personal protective equipment, masks and gowns—those are high priority for the health-care workers."

But Zikry's patients—and patients across the country—wanted to be tested. "I got yelled at a lot," Zikry said. "I understand the anger." The P.P.E. makes communication more difficult—all that a patient sees is eyes behind a plastic shield. "It's that much more distance between patient and provider." At Elmhurst, which offers translation in dozens of languages, conversations often occur through an interpreter. "The most difficult thing has been describing to patients what is going on," Zikry said. "We ourselves are so confused and scared, and every day when we come on shift it seems like there's a different protocol"—the guidance comes from the state Department of Health—"for who are we testing, who are we admitting."

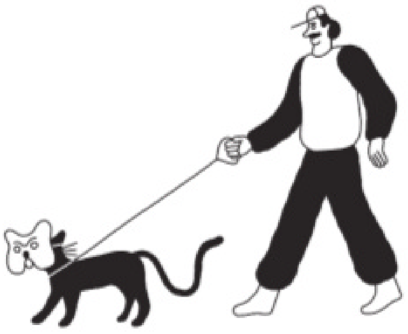
Repeatedly, Zikry had to explain to patients that they probably did have the coronavirus, but that there wasn't much the hospital could do for them—they needed to go home and take Tylenol, and come back if they were in respiratory distress. "These patients are well informed," he said. "They say we're not testing enough and that's why it's spreading so much, and there I am trying to explain, maybe with a video interpreter in Mandarin, the intricacies of why we are past the point of testing, that we don't have those resources."

Some patients, frustrated and frightened, told Zikry that this would never happen in another country, and that he didn't care about them. "That is so hard," he said. "I often think about what mistakes I may have made, what I could do better. But the one mistake I know I never make is the mistake of not caring." These encounters can exacerbate a sense of loneliness, one that paradoxically persists alongside a heightened camaraderie among E.R. doctors—all in it together, day after day. "Even co-residents—people with the exact same lived experience—we don't get to talk to each other much," Zikry said. "We're working so hard. And we're also on quarantine." The residents used to meet up at a bar or a coffee shop. "That has completely dissipated. And it feels strange. Because they are the only people who know what my days are like."

After his shifts, Zikry took off his P.P.E., showered at the hospital, then changed his clothes completely before turning off his phone and running some six miles to the Upper East Side, where he shares an apartment with his younger brother, Bassel. Bassel has kept their refrigerator stocked. That week, Zikry's bedtime reading was "Duel in the Sun," an account of the 1982 Boston Marathon, in which Alberto Salazar and Dick Beardsley had one last great race, before problems—illness, addiction—pulled them down. Zikry says that his runs home help him reach a reconciliation with the day, "which is not a peace, it's different from peace." Reading helps his mind change tracks. "I'm a big dreamer," Zikry said. "And I love sleep." Most nights, he gets a break from the hospital in his dreams.

Every day in an E.R. is potentially traumatic. Dan Egan, an E.R. physician at New York-Presbyterian/Columbia Hospital, has been a doctor for more than fifteen years. "We work with disasters, we see horrible things all the time," he told me. "We see unexpected deaths as part of our regular job." Still, he said, colleagues were now calling him crying in fear—something that had never happened before. "I think it's that it's unknown. I remember the time of Ebola. Of course we were scared—and that was a more deadly disease—but it didn't feel like it does now."

Egan and I went to medical school together. I was there for the classic wrong reason: to fulfill parental expectations. (I had not even been able to handle the fertilized-egg dissection, back in fifth grade.) Egan was the magnificent opposite. "Honestly, I loved all of medical school," he said lightly, as if it were a goofy attribute. He has a beautiful voice and sings in choirs, but he has a disarming way of speaking like a teen-ager when it suits the situation. If our medical-school class had had a homecoming king, it would have been him. He was kind to everyone, and he never complained—a popular medical-student pastime. He has loved the E.R. since he was a kid, when his mother was an E.R. nurse. When we were in school together, I thought—and still think—that if I were sick and scared I would want Dan to be my doctor. I told him that. He laughed. "I don't want this to sound strange, but one of the things I treasure is being able to communicate bad news to patients in a compassionate and human way," he said. Sometimes a patient comes in with a headache, which turns out to be something awful. Patients come in with a rash, and leave with the news that they have cancer. "My father died of metastatic esophageal cancer, and I still remember that conversation with the oncologist," Egan said. "It was so not compassionate. So not humanistic. I couldn't believe it was happening in that way. I know my patients will remember these conversations, and it's important to me that the human piece be there."



Egan was exposed to COVID-19 on March 12th, and went into quarantine. He did telemedicine while out, but, he said, he felt "almost guilty that I couldn't be there to step up." When the quarantine protocol for health-care providers with mild symptoms was reduced, from fourteen days to seven, he returned early. He felt well, and wanted to work. I heard again and again that, despite doctors' stress and fear, they were glad to have something to offer. When I asked Zikry why he chose to specialize in emergency medicine, he replied, "For times like this." Yvette Calderon, an E.R. doctor at Mount Sinai, who grew up in the Chelsea projects, a few miles south of the hospital, said, "This is the door to the hospital. The E.R. is what faces the community. I grew up seeing that there was a need, and I wanted to be in the part of the hospital that serves literally everyone."

On March 24th, New York had been shut down for four days. Governor Andrew Cuomo said, "We haven't flattened the curve, and the curve is actually increasing." Cuomo cited estimates that New York State might need as many as a hundred and forty thousand hospital beds. The city had some twenty-three thousand beds in use, and hospitals were converting surgical and pediatric units into space for COVID patients. Work was beginning on a four-thousand-bed facility at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center to decant non-COVID patients from hospitals—but even at Elmhurst there were now very few of these.

"I'm truly exhausted," Zikry told me that day, at the end of another overnight shift. "I'm starting to see patients I've already seen, now in worse condition. A patient who four days ago had an oxygen saturation of a hundred per cent and an O.K. chest X-ray, then two days later their saturation is low nineties and it's not a great chest X-ray—well, they come in now with a saturation in the high eighties and with horrendous chest X-rays, and we need to admit them to the hospital." Zikry knows that medical language can obscure as well as explain: "The term used for what you see on the X-rays is 'ground-glass opacities.' I have no idea what actual ground glass looks like. I can tell you that on the X-ray it looks like a snowed-out background, or like when I go out in the rain—I wear glasses—and I can't really see, because of the water on my glasses. There are these patchy opacities. That's what the chest X-rays look like."

Each E.R. has a board that notes who has been seen and who remains to be seen, and clearing the board constitutes part of E.R. doctors' collective sense of well-being. "We never caught up on the board," Zikry told me, after a shift. "All of us were working so hard, but we were about forty people behind all night." As the crisis progressed, it was taking longer and longer for patients to be admitted to a ward in the hospital—and more critically ill patients were remaining in the E.R. to receive care. There were stretchers in hallways and the common spaces, wherever space could be found.

"What strikes me is the deterioration of what is normal," Zikry said. Walking by some stretchers, he noticed two patients who were not in visible distress but who had oxygen saturations in the seventies. They needed to go into the critical-care area immediately. Soon after, "I hear this guy calling me by name, he's smiling and waving," Zikry said. "And it's this man—I've seen him three times this week. I have friends who would be so jealous of how much more time I have spent hanging out with this guy than with them. So I was feeling amused and also maybe dismissive—that I have already counselled this guy so many times to go home and watch his symptoms."

The man, to the eye, seemed unchanged. "I go ahead and order his chest X-ray again, not expecting to see a change—and it was atrocious." The man was on the verge of crashing—of not being able to breathe properly without medical assistance. "It was so scary. And he had looked so well." Many doctors had described to me the grave contrast, in many COVID-19 cases, between a patient who can sit comfortably in a chair and a chest X-ray that shows pneumonia in both lungs. Soon, those patients can abruptly crash. "You see the patient using the full energy of the body to breathe," Zikry said. "Neck muscles are distending. You see the muscles around the ribs."

At around 3:45 A.M., Zikry received a text from his mother: "I'm in tears thinking of you." She was worried that he wouldn't take care of himself. She said that he was the most important. The text made him laugh a little. Zikry is not much of a crier. He recalled crying only once in the past ten years, while studying for the Step One exam, a comprehensive all-day test at the end of the second year of medical school. "I just hated it so much, I wanted to quit medical school. I had composed the e-mail," Zikry said. "I called my mom and was saying I wanted to quit, and she was in a car with my brother, and I think he had been yelling at her, too." His mother dropped the phone accidentally. He called back, telling her that she didn't care about him, and that he was going to quit then and there. "She said—and I give her so much credit—she said, 'Look, O.K., if you want to quit, you can quit tomorrow morning.'" He didn't quit. His third year of training changed his perspective: he kept meeting physicians about whom he thought, That's the kind of adult I'd like to be.

Zikry took an Uber home from his shift that day, instead of running. That was unusual for him, but he was unusually tired. His residency program was paying for rides for residents, as a gesture of support. It was around 7:45 A.M., the beginning of a kind of day off. Interns call this a DOMA—day off, my ass. He would get home around eight-thirty, have breakfast with his brother, try to rest, and then be back at work by 7 A.M. the next day.

"I miss the sunsets."

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Throughout the crisis, doctors have made clear their dismay at the lack of proper supplies—both for their own protection and for the health of their patients. "The systemic frustrations are the most exhausting," Zikry told me. "Today, we ran out of oxygen masks for the patients to use. So much work goes into trying to locate and obtain more. We had a shortage of oxygen tanks, so we connected more than one patient to larger tanks—stuff we normally wouldn't do. Will we run out of masks entirely? People can give you answers, but they are not witnessing what is happening in front of you. People can tell you it will be O.K., and it is solvable, but this has never happened before."

Physicians in other cities watched New York for a sense of what was headed their way. David DiBardino, a pulmonologist at the University of Pennsylvania Medical Center, described how the process of entering his hospital had changed for employees. "We're funnelled through an entrance that hasn't been open for years," he said. "It has this black metal gate that looks so gothic. It's like a near-future dystopian scene, like something you would watch on Netflix. Some people are trying to distance in line, but also it's a line, you can't be that far away—so distance, but not wanting to get cut." On March 26th, the third day of the new entrance policy, the line was three blocks long. "Three city blocks of people in scrubs panicking. This anesthesiologist who is older saw the line and started screaming—he was anxious about how

AT THE RUINS OF YANKEE STADIUM

It is that week in April when all the lions start to shine,
café tables poised for selfies, windows squeegeed
and fenceposts freshly painted around Tompkins Square,
former haven of junkies and disgraceful pigeons
today chock-full of French bulldogs and ornamental tulips
superimposed atop the old, familiar, unevictable dirt.
Lying on the couch, I am drifting with the conversation
of bees, a guttural buzz undergirding the sound
from a rusty string of wind chimes hung and forgotten
in the overgrown beech tree marooned out back,
limbs shaggy with neon-green flame-tongue leaflets
forking through a blanket of white blossoms,
long-neglected evidence of spring at its most deluxe,
pure exuberant fruitfulness run amok.
Rigorous investigation has identified two dialects
buzzing through the plunder-fall, hovering black bumblebees
and overworked honeybees neck-deep in nectar-bliss,
as the city to us, blundering against its oversaturated anthers
until the pollen coats our skin, as if sugar-dusted,
as if rolled in honey and flour to bake a cake
for the queen, yes, she is with us, it is spring and this
is her coronation, blossoming pear and crab-apple
and cherry trees, too many pinks to properly absorb,
every inch of every branch lusting after beauty.
To this riot of stimuli, this vernal bombardment
of the senses, I have capitulated without a fight.
But not the beech tree. It never falters. It is stalwart
and grounded and garlanded, a site-specific creation,
seed to rootling to this companionable giant,
tolerant and benign, how many times have I reflected
upon their superiority to our species, the trees of earth?
Reflection, self-reflection—my job is to polish the mirror,
to amplify the echoes. Even now I am hard at work,
researching the ineffable. *I loafe and invite my soul*,
for Walt Whitman is ever my companion in New York,
thronged carcass of a city in which one is never alone
and yet never un-nagged-at by loneliness, a hunger
as much for the otherness of others as for the much-sung self,
for something somewhere on the verge of realization,
for what lies around the corner, five or six blocks uptown,
hiding out in the Bronx or across the river in Jersey.
Somewhere on the streets of the city right now somebody
is meeting the love of their life for the very first time,
somebody is drinking schnapps from a paper sack
discussing Monty Python with a man impersonating a priest,
someone is waiting for the bus to South Carolina
to visit her sister in hospice, someone is teleconferencing
with the office back in Hartford, Antwerp, Osaka,
someone is dust-sweeping, throat-clearing, cart-wheeling,
knife-grinding, day-trading, paying dues, dropping a dime,
giving the hairy eyeball, pissing against a wall,
someone is snoozing, sniffling, cavorting, nibbling,
roistering, chiding, snuggling, confiding,
pub-crawling, speed-dating, pump-shining, ivy-trimming,
tap-dancing, curb-kicking, rat-catching, tale-telling,
getting lost, getting high, getting busted, breaking up,
breaking down, breaking loose, losing faith,
going broke, going green, feeling blue, seeing red,
someone is davening, busking, hobnobbing, grandstanding,
playing the ponies, feeding the pigeons, gull-watching,
wolf-whistling, badgering the witness, pulling down the grill
and locking up shop, writing a letter home in Pashto or
Xhosa, learning to play the xylophone, waiting for an Uber X,
conspiring, patrolling, transcending, bedevilling,
testifying, bloviating, absolving, kibbitzing,
kowtowing, pinky-swearing, tarring and shingling,
breaking and entering, delivering and carting away,
enwreathing lampposts with yellow ribbons,
reading Apollinaire on a bench littered with fallen petals,
waiting for an ambulance to pass before crossing First Avenue
toward home. No wonder they fear it so intensely,
the purists and isolationists in Kansas, the ideologues
in Kandahar, it is a relentless negotiation with multiplicity,
a constant engagement with the shape-shifting mob,
diversely luminous as sunlight reflecting off mirrored glass
in puzzle pieces of apostolic light. Certainly this is not
the Eternal City but it is certainly Imperial, certainly
tyrannical, democratic, demagogic, dynastic, anarchic,
hypertrophic, hyperreal. An empire of rags and photons.
An empire encoded in the bricks from which it was built,
each a stamped emblem of its labor-intensive materiality,
hundreds of millions barged down the Hudson each year
from the clay pits of Haverstraw and Kingston
after the Great Fire of 1835, a hinterland of dependencies,

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close people were standing in the line."

As at Elmhurst, doctors receive only one set of P.P.E. for the day. "The P.P.E. has actually been put under lock and key," DiBardino said, and laughed. "I have to deal with these things with humor, because it's all so weird and scary." In subsequent days, the line to enter the hospital grew short, then long again; instructions for hand hygiene, temperature taking, and mask distribution kept shifting. "What has really been startling is this gap between the protocols—between how we used to throw the mask away after every procedure and the really difficult practical challenge of, how do you avoid contaminating yourself with the new conservation protocol," he said. "It's hilarious how tedious it is. You touch the back of your neck, and then you're, like, Is the back of my neck contaminated now?"

DiBardino, who with his wife has three children—fifteen-month-old twins and a three-year-old—does not typically work in the I.C.U. "As interventional pulmonologists, we are board certified in critical-care medicine, but it's not something we do on a daily basis." On April 6th, that changed. "It's really, personally, scary," he said. "There's a really good chance that I will contract COVID-19—and I think, you know, you and I should be fine if we

quarries and factories and arterial truck farms
delivering serum to that muscular heart, a toiling collective
of Irish sandhogs and Iroquois beam walkers and Ivoirian
umbrella venders collecting kindling for the bonfire
that has lured, like moths, the entire world to its blaze.
As with my tree, the hubbub of bees its exaltation.
Apis, maker of honey, *Bombus*, the humble bumbler,
and the tree a common American beech.
It rules the yard, overawing a straggling ailanthus
hard against the wall of the Con Ed substation.
Along the fence some scraggly boxwood shrubs,
a table collapsed into rusted segments, two piles of bricks—
what's their story?—who made them, carted them,
set them as a patio, and who undid that work to create these
mundane, rain-eroded monuments to human neglect?
Why does nobody tend this little garden?
Undisciplined ivy scales the building in thick ropes
and coils of porcelain berry vine, whose fruit will ripen
to obscene brilliance come autumn, those strange berries,
turquoise, violet, azure . . . Ah, I've lost my train
of thought. Berries. The city. People, bricks, the past.
Bees in a flowering beech tree. Symbiosis. Streams and webs
and permutations, viruses replicating, mutating, evolving.
Books in a library, bricks in a wall, people in a city.
A man selling old golf clubs on the corner of Ludlow Street.
A woman on the F train carefully rubbing ointment
up and down her red, swollen arms. Acorns—
tossing them into the Hudson River from a bench as I did
when I was Peter Stuyvesant, when I was Walt Whitman,
when we were of the Lenape and Broadway our hunting trail.
Then the deer vanished, the docks decayed, the towers fell.
The African graveyard was buried beneath concrete
as the memory of slavery has been obscured by dogma
and denial. The city speaks a hundred languages,
it straddles three rivers, it holds forty islands hostage,
it is an archipelago of memory, essential and insubstantial
and evasive as the progeny of steam grates at dawn,
a gathering of apparitions. The Irish have vanished
from Washington Heights but I still see myself eating
a cold pot-roast sandwich, watching "McHale's Navy"
on black-and-white TV in my grandmother's old apartment.
I remember the parties we used to throw on Jane Street,
shots of tequila and De La Soul on the tape deck, everyone
dancing, everyone young and vibrant and vivacious—
decades later we discovered a forgotten videotape
and our sons, watching with bemused alarm, blurted out,
Mom, you were so beautiful! She was. We all were,
everyone except the city. The city was a wreck and then
it was a renovation project and now it is a playground of privilege
and soon it will be something else, liquid as a dream.
Empires come and go, ours will fade in turn, even the city
will retreat, step by step, as the Atlantic rises against it.
But water is not the end. Bricks are made of clay and sand
and when they disintegrate, when they return to silt,
new bricks will be made by hands as competent as ours.
People will live in half-flooded tenements, people will live
on houseboats moored to bank pillars along Wall Street.
It's all going under, the entire Eastern Seaboard.
The capital will move to Kansas City but nobody will mourn
for Washington. Someone will invent virtual gasoline. Someone
will write a poem called "At the Ruins of Yankee Stadium"
which will be set to a popular tune by a media impresario
and people in Ohio will sing it during the seventh-inning stretch
remembering, or imagining, the glory of what was.
Time is with us viscerally, idiomatically, time inhabits us
like a glass bowl filled with tap water at the kitchen sink,
and some little pink stones, and a sunken plastic castle
with a child's face etched in a slate-gray window.
Fish swim past, solemn as ghosts, and the child smiles sadly,
wondering, perhaps, how bees will pollinate underwater.
He seems a little melancholy. He must miss his old home,
a skin-honeyed hive of multifarious humankind,
a metropolis of stately filth doused in overrich perfume.
The castle door swings open and the boy emerges
like an astronaut stepping warily onto the moon.
When he sees us, through the warping lens of the bowl,
watching him with desperate, misfocussed passion, we are
as cartoonishly gargantuan as the past, and he as spectral
as the future, raising one small hand to wave goodbye.

—*Campbell McGrath*

catch it, but whether to bring that home to my family? Should I just stay at work and not come home?"

DiBardino was asked to lead a team at a neurology ward that was transformed into an I.C.U. for COVID care—a seven-day tour of duty. An anesthesiologist was assigned to head one half of the ward, and DiBardino the other. "The rooms have this pretty loud hum to them," he said, because negative pressure is used to keep the COVID air from escaping. The doors to the patients' rooms are kept shut, and typically only one medical worker goes in at a time, while the rest watch through the glass. "It's like a fishbowl," DiBardino said. He described his first day of training there: "So the nurse goes into the room with a wipeboard. She'll write, 'B.P. is super low. Max norepi?' Or she'll write, 'I need a new I.V. bag,' and so someone runs to get it." Coming in and out of the room is slowed by the donning and doffing of gloves, a gown, the N95 mask, and a face shield.

Emergencies occur all the time in an I.C.U. "An alarm seems to go off every five minutes, but then only one person goes into the room for the response—it's so weird," DiBardino said. "It's almost like we're running as fast as we can, but with one foot nailed to the ground." Since the doors of the rooms are glass, doctors standing outside sometimes direct the provider inside by writing backward on the glass doors, so that the person inside can read it. "I know this is stupid," DiBardino said, "but one of the first thoughts I had was: I can't write backward!"

By early April, funeral homes in New York were overwhelmed, and the city had deployed forty-five mobile morgues. The Javits Center switched from serving only non-COVID patients to serving exclusively COVID patients. More than six million Americans filed for unemployment in one week. A midlife-crisis film called "Phoenix, Oregon" topped the box-office, making $2,903 from showings on twenty-seven screens. Half the planet was under lockdown orders. People mixed quarantinis, didn't quite educate their children. Guidance on masks was still changing. My mom wrote to my brother and me about ordering tonic water, because she had read that it had quinine, which was getting talked about as a remedy.

At Elmhurst, as at many publicly funded hospitals in poor communities throughout the country, the situation was deteriorating. In the best of times, these hospitals are underfunded and overwhelmed. Yaagnik Kosuri, a general-surgery intern at Mount Sinai Hospital, who has been working at Elmhurst during the pandemic, described much of his work as a "hundred-per-cent Sisyphean task. That is the situation at baseline. It just wasn't set up for success in the setting of something so catastrophic."

So many patients were in the E.R. that a resident was assigned to walk around checking their oxygen levels, to make sure that they weren't crashing. This job had never existed before. "I thought the volume could not be worse," Zikry said. "I thought we had reached an asymptote. We have superseded that. The other day, we had thirty-one intubated patients in our E.R., which is twenty-eight to thirty-one more than normal." Now when he left the hospital each day a dozen reporters were there to ask questions, as if the doctors were some dark version of Broadway actors exiting the stage door. "I just show up to work," Zikry said. "I am very scared to do it. I am scared something is going to happen. On my way over, I say to myself, I'm going to show up. If I just keep showing up, something good will come of it compounded over time."

It had been Bassel's birthday, so Zikry decided to try to cook spicy fish tacos, one of his brother's favorite meals. At Citarella, Zikry had walked past the mustard he wanted, then taken a few steps backward to get it, and in the process bumped into someone, who started shouting at him: How could he be walking backward at a time like this? "I had to let that one go," Zikry said.

In the E.R., the work had become "sadly algorithmic." Typically, the glory of working in an E.R. is that you never know who will come in the door, what kinds of problems they will have. "We now presume they all have COVID," Zikry said. "You don't have to be Dr. House to figure it out." He said that he tries to tell a patient early in the conversation, " 'I think you have coronavirus and you need to be admitted to the hospital.' I think it's a shocking conversation for them. Especially if they've been waiting for eight hours and I've been seeing them for thirty seconds."

In normal times, a nurse or a technician draws blood for lab tests, a task that doctors tend to be not that good at, but now, because of staff shortages, it's part of the job. Zikry described drawing labs from a patient, then taking the patient to get a chest X-ray. Hospital stretchers drive worse than grocery carts. "I hit his bed against a corner," Zikry said. "And this guy, who hadn't spoken any English up to that point, turned and said, 'Is this your first fucking day?' " Zikry has a youthful face. "I have the same questions he does. I don't know how I ended up in this situation."

To contain the spread of the virus, family members are not allowed in the E.R. or on I.C.U. floors. People are in distress alone. E.R.s, which are often in basements, sometimes don't have good cell-phone reception, and worried families have no choice but to call doctors. When I spoke with Dan Egan at the end of March, he was coming off two consecutive night shifts. Over the weeks, more staff arrived—Egan worked with a pediatrician and with an orthopedic physician assistant—but the work remained overwhelming. Egan said, "I have never put more patients on a ventilator in one shift in my life, and of course I was thinking, If this is how it is now, and with what the models are predicting for a week or two from now—it makes me really scared."

He described the barring of visitors as a secondary trauma. "Families are calling me all night for updates," he said. As an E.R. doctor in New York, he's accustomed to being yelled at. The current situation is not like that: "Instead, they are, like, Doctor, I know how busy you are, I just want an update on how he's doing." One young patient struck him as the sickest person he had seen that night. "And I'm trying to relay that over the phone to the family, who thinks he's at the hospital with, like, 'a little coronavirus.' " The patient was on a ventilator. "I wanted to be honest about how sick he was, but I didn't want to take away hope. They're asking me, 'Will I be able to talk to him tomorrow?' And, because they're not here, it's so much more difficult to explain what it means to be on a ventilator—that a machine is breathing for him." Egan wants to be empathetic, but he's taking care of many patients at once. "Multiple times last night, I had to say, 'I am so sorry, but I have to get off the phone, because someone really sick is coming in right now.' "

The medicine is the medicine, Egan explained. Everyone is on oxygen, and everyone is there for the same thing. "But people are dying, and the family is not there." That night, he had an older patient who was critically ill, on a ventilator. He was not expected to live much longer. Egan had had multiple phone conversations with the man's daughter about how sick he was, and what the family's goals of care were—they wanted him to be free of pain. The daughter got off the phone to contact her siblings. "Then she called me back and asked me if I could do her a favor. I say, 'Yes, of course.' She says to me, 'Would you go in and put the phone to his ear so we can all say goodbye?' "

He put on his gown and gloves and full P.P.E., and went into the patient's room. "I had the phone on speaker, because I couldn't really hold it to his ear with all of the equipment. I felt like I was intruding, but that's what it was." The words were mostly Spanish. Six or seven family members, all telling the man how much they loved him. "I thought, My God, this is real. This is what everyone is doing now." ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS

STYLE RULES YOU MUST NEVER BREAK

BY COLIN STOKES

- With a three-button jacket, button the top button sometimes, the middle button always, and the lowest button never, even in a life-or-death situation.

- Match your belt to your shoehorn, which should dangle from a gauge in your earlobe.

- Don't wear white to someone else's wedding, unless it's a wedding dress and you're planning to object at the designated objecting moment in the ceremony and insist that you replace the bride.

- Don't wear white before Memorial Day, except if you plan to object at a wedding.

- Don't wear white after Labor Day, except if you are planning to object at the wedding of the person who objected at your wedding, and thereby win back your ex.

- Never wear jeans with a blazer, unless the blazer is also denim and you have undergone multiple grafts to make all of your skin denim.

- As a general rule, anything Timothée Chalamet wears will look incredible on you.

- As long as you look exactly like Timothée Chalamet.

- Don't wear chinos while casting a spell to make yourself look like Timothée Chalamet—they don't really fit with the spell-casting aesthetic.

- Dress for the job you want, not the job you have, assuming that the job you want is not one in which you get to lounge around your apartment naked.

- Shorts in the office are a no-go, unless you have curtains hanging from each knee that can be drawn to cover your calves in the event of an official business meeting.

- Don't wear blue with black ink coming out of your eyes—people will think that you're copying that Billie Eilish music video.

- Novelty ties are a bad look at funerals.

- Novelty funerals are a bad look in general.

- Don't wear a brown gown with a frown in town in clown makeup, unless you want to scare a lot of children.

- A fireman's uniform is work-appropriate only if you're a fireman, a stripper, or an undercover agent trying to infiltrate a gang of firefighters or strippers.

- Never match hiking socks with hiking boots—it's like a hat on a hat. Go sockless instead.

- Never wear bandages on the blisters you got from hiking without socks.

- Don't wear a hat on a hat—it's like a hat on a hat.

- Wear socks with sandals only if you put the socks on over the sandals to protect them.

- If you're tall, don't wear Heelys, the shoes with wheels.

- If you're short, don't wear Heelys, the shoes with wheels.

- If you're of medium height, don't wear Heelys, the shoes with wheels, unless the company offers you a lucrative endorsement deal.

- If your lucrative endorsement deal with Heelys falls through, get revenge by filming yourself wearing Heelys and "accidentally" rolling down a steep hill, losing control, and tumbling into a pile of garbage.

- Before leaving the house, look in the mirror and take off one eyebrow.

- Remember, true style isn't about adhering to someone else's arbitrary rules. It's about expressing yourself.

- Unless the self you're expressing is someone with bad style, in which case you're a lost cause. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

BRAVE NEW WORLD DEPT.

ALMOST THERE

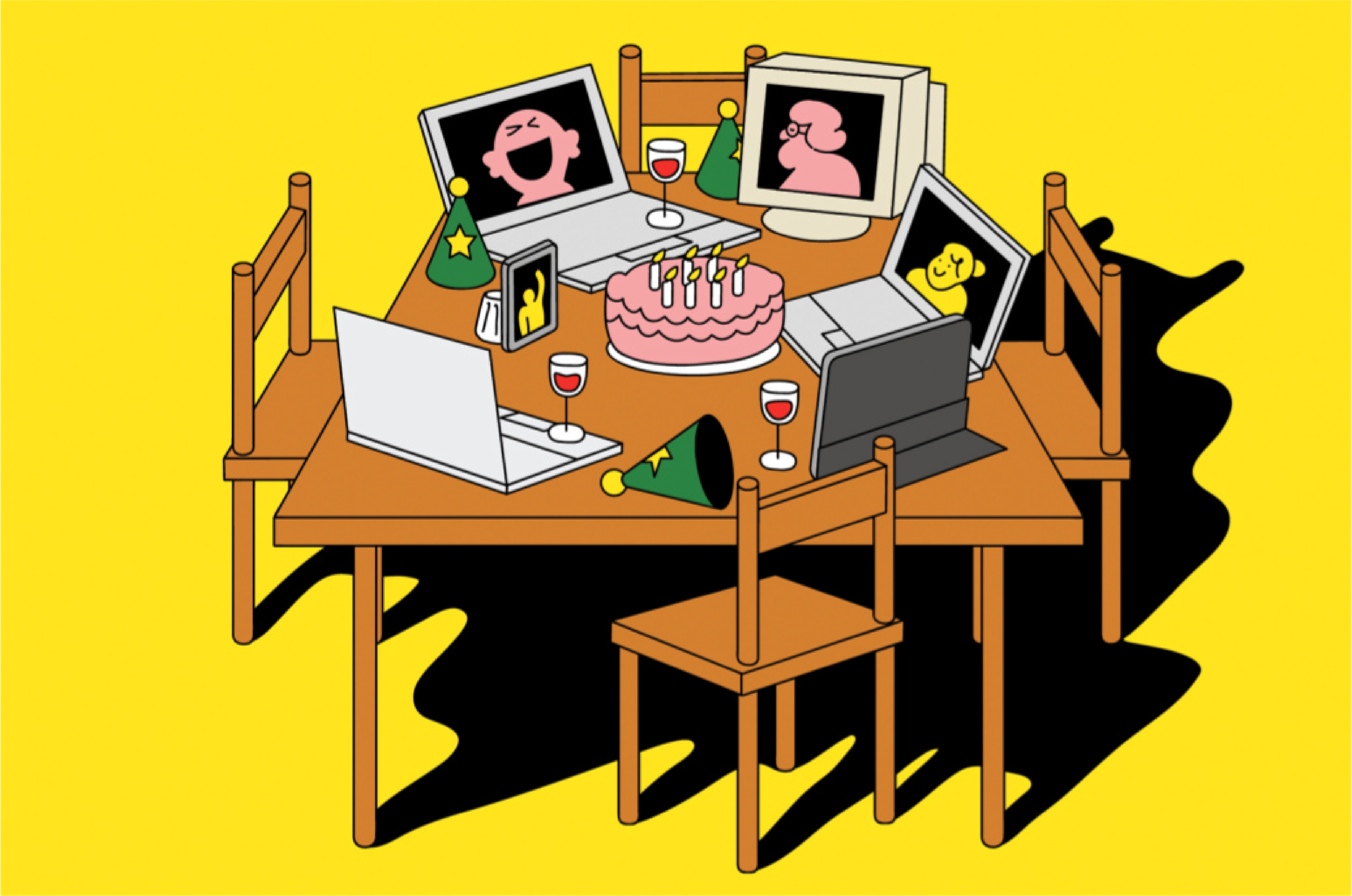
Embracing the chaotic side of Zoom.

BY NAOMI FRY

Three years ago, the political analyst and South Korea expert Robert Kelly was giving a live interview on the BBC, via videoconference, from his home office in Busan, when his two young children barged into the room. The pair—a jauntily assertive, glasses-wearing preschooler and a baby who skittered in, as if propelled by a mysterious force, on a wheeled walker—were pursued and eventually apprehended by their frantic mother, who, on her hands and knees, hustled the saboteurs out and pulled the office door shut. The video quickly went viral, but I had forgotten about it until recently, when the videoconferencing service Zoom, and the circumstances under which I and many others had begun to use it, reminded me of Kelly's thin smile and his wife's desperately grappling arms.

As the coronavirus pandemic made its rapid and implacable advance across the United States, forcing sweeping closures of schools and workplaces and bringing about the disappearance of any type of collective, real-world activity, it became obvious that a new era had begun. With millions of Americans self-quarantining for the foreseeable future, Zoom became, seemingly overnight, not only a professional lifeline but also a way of life. Suddenly, we couldn't see anyone in person, but everyone appeared to be seeing one another on Zoom—at college lectures and in elementary-school P.E. classes, at cardio-kickboxing training and on kindergarten playdates. Some nights, after spying screenshots posted on social media of acquaintances raising glasses during a virtual cocktail party, one might experience Zoom FOMO. Other evenings, one navigated conflicting Zoom plans. "I have two friends I watch a movie with, and now I have to push that to another day because of a surprise birthday party," a friend told me.

Being confined to our homes, often with roommates or family members or pets, and having no clear separation between work and leisure, has given rise to a culture whose weirdness Zoom has made particularly legible. Nowadays, we are all Robert Kelly. In an article in the *Times*, Brian X. Chen provided Zoom-specific etiquette tips: "Our families are more important than anyone, but that doesn't mean our colleagues want to see our partners in their bathrobes, our cats sitting on keyboards or our children throwing toys." On the Cut, Lizzie Post, Emily Post's great-great-granddaughter, weighed in on inappropriate Zoom behavior.



Being confined to our homes has given rise to a culture whose weirdness Zoom has made particularly legible.

ILLUSTRATION BY IGOR BASTIDAS

Drinking coffee or tea during a meeting is fine, but, she warned, "avoid slurping"; she, too, vetoed bathrobes. On NPR's "All Things Considered," the *USA Today* columnist Steven Petrow said, bluntly, "If you need to go to the bathroom . . . turn off the video. Turn off the audio, because sound is louder than you think."

As I encountered these well-meaning suggestions, I felt a resistance rising within me. Surely the haste with which we have had to adjust to the new reality—and the insistence with which the human element tends to insert itself into the supposedly seamless world of technology—makes it inevitable that Zoom, like life itself, will be chaotic. And, although I might be more interested than most in seeing colleagues in bathrobes and cats on keyboards, or hearing a co-worker's surprisingly noisy peeing, I also suspect that embracing rather than rejecting this chaos would be a gain even for those less prying than me. As long as we're living in a trying time, why pretend otherwise? At a moment when the stakes of real-life unpredictability are deadly serious, Zoom is a space in which to safely welcome unpredictability and looser boundaries.

I've found that even the most subtle shifts that Zoom brings about have the power to jar and fascinate. On my first-ever video call on the platform—could it have been only in mid-March?—my husband and I spoke to our financial adviser. On the occasions we'd seen him in the past, he had been fully suited, sitting in his spare, corporate office in a lower-Manhattan high-rise, where an assistant offered us coffee and half-sized bottles of mineral water. Working from home, he was dressed in a lightweight button-down shirt. It happened to be a beautiful day, and the window behind him was open, and framed by soft, cream-colored curtains that appeared to sway slightly in the breeze. During the conversation, I felt myself mentally latching onto those curtains, which, as we spoke of the economic crisis and how it might affect my husband's and my retirement plan, seemed to throw the formal discussion we were having into a more leisurely context. Had the financial adviser absconded to a south-of-the-border resort with our meagre savings, my husband, who had also noticed the lightweight shirt and the swaying curtains, wondered jokingly, once the call was over? Did he have a salt-rimmed margarita waiting just beyond the view of his computer's camera? This was extremely unlikely, but it wasn't totally impossible, and the notion opened up a vista. Zoom was providing us with more clues than ever before with which to figure out, or at least to imagine, what people might be doing in their more private lives—what they might *really* be like.

As a young child, in the early nineteen-eighties, I had a board book in which an illustration that was meant to signify "the future" showed a bespectacled, smiling man speaking with a bespectacled, smiling woman, or, rather, with her image, on a TV-like contraption. The videophone seemed to me a hardly conceivable invention—a thing one might encounter only on space-age shows like "The Jetsons" and "Star Trek." Then, suddenly, in the early two-thousands, Skype entered the mass market. I had recently moved to the U.S., to attend graduate school, and I used the platform to speak to family and friends back home, in Israel, feeling amazed at our ability to see rather than just hear one another, but also resigned to the lo-fi glitchiness of the communication, the lags and distortions that often made the whole endeavor seem not worth the trouble. In the years that followed, several new services for videoconferencing emerged: Cisco Webex, Google Hangouts, FaceTime, WhatsApp, and, in 2016, Houseparty, which allows users to join their friends' private chats if granted permission—a feature that gives the app a rollicking, vaguely louche air.

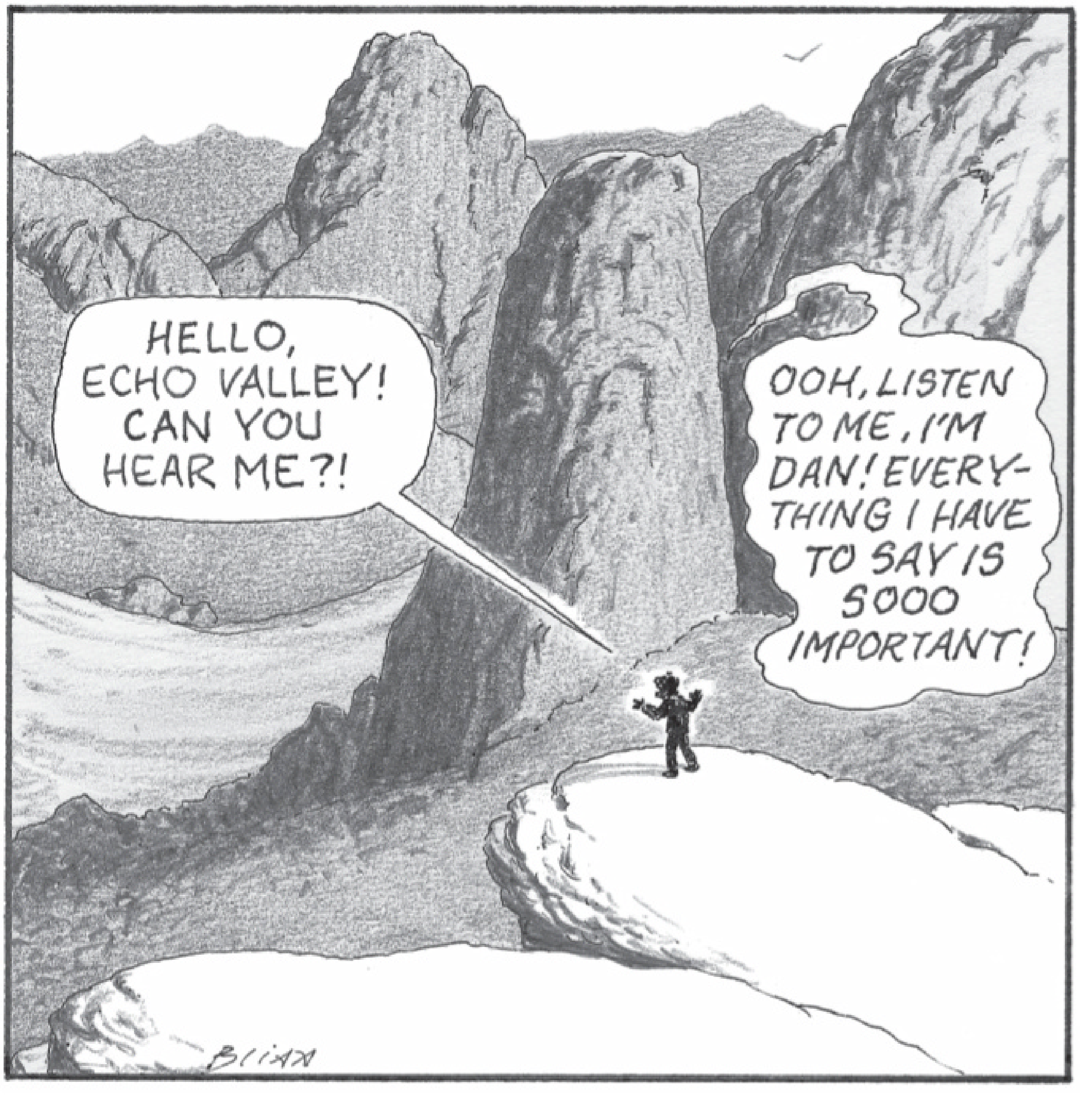
Zoom was founded in 2011, by Eric S. Yuan, a Chinese-born engineer who is the company's C.E.O., and it has been on the market since 2013. In 2017, Zoom's valuation reached a billion dollars, and it hit sixteen billion when the company went public, in April, 2019. The service was a success story, but it was mostly used by remote workers at companies like Uber. Less than a year later, when the coronavirus pandemic hit, Zoom became the fastest-growing videoconferencing service in the world. The number of daily users jumped from ten million last December to two hundred million in late March. The company is now worth more than forty billion dollars. On the service's basic plan, a meeting can include up to a hundred people and costs nothing if kept to under forty minutes. Zoom's plan for educational institutions normally starts at eighteen hundred dollars annually, but, since the outbreak of the virus, Yuan has made the service free to all K-12 schools in countries including the U.S., Japan, and Italy—a generous decision that seems to have contributed to the service's skyrocketing popularity. The estimated number of daily downloads, which averaged fifty-six thousand in January, was 2.13 million on March 23rd alone.

Jake Saper, a partner at the venture-capital firm Emergence, Zoom's first Silicon Valley-based institutional investor, explained, "A videoconferencing application is that rare tool where everyone, from my grandma to my rabbi, can tell immediately how well it's operating. If it's lagging by one second, the user notices." According to Saper, Zoom's "underlying code makes the user feel like there's no distance between him and the person he's talking to." Zoom's design is also appealingly basic. The "gallery view" mode, which arranges participants in "Hollywood Squares"-style tiles, has the somewhat dated appeal of graph paper, suggesting a stodgy reliability. The "active speaker view" mode—in which a single enlarged window is given to whomever is currently speaking, granting all users the sense of being poised for a closeup by an unseen cameraman—is only a touch more exciting. There is a mute function—an option that many will likely come to miss once face-to-face meetings resume—and participants can choose a virtual background to block their environment from view. They can also share their screen with other users (whether for the purpose of PowerPoint tutorials or word games, memes or YouTube videos), and a chat box is available for real-time written communication—which, not unlike passing notes in class, feels a little illicit.

Zoom has taken to presenting itself almost as a utility company, akin to National Grid or Con Ed. “In this together,” the tagline on the Zoom Web site now reads. “Keeping you securely connected wherever you are.” Indeed, it has sometimes seemed to me that, in the absence of a quick and coherent governmental intervention in the coronavirus crisis, the dependably achieved, tech-enabled community Zoom promises is one of the only things many Americans feel they have to lean on. Zoom’s user-friendliness, however, has come with some drawbacks. Because the platform does not require that users log in, it is vulnerable to so-called Zoombombing, in which trolls appear in strangers’ meetings, sometimes disseminating graphic content through the shared-screen option. (This troubling practice nevertheless led to the following winning sentence in the *Times:* “Chipotle was forced to end a public Zoom chat that the brand had co-hosted with the musician Lauv after one participant began broadcasting pornography to hundreds of attendees.”)

On March 26th, a journalist for Motherboard revealed that Zoom was using software that shared customers’ data with Facebook. (In response, Zoom removed the software.) On March 30th, the *Times* reported, the New York attorney general, Letitia James, sent a letter to Zoom to ask what measures it was planning to put in place to protect its surging customer base from hacker attacks and malicious third-party users seeking to gain access to people’s Webcams. (Zoom replied in a statement that the company appreciated James’s “engagement,” and noted that it was “happy to provide her with the requested information.”) In April, the New York City Department of Education announced that it would prohibit teachers from using Zoom to communicate with their students, owing to privacy issues. (No immediate timeline has been given. As of this writing, my eight-year-old daughter’s Brooklyn public school is still using Zoom.)

It has yet to be seen whether the service will successfully address its critics’ concerns. In the meantime, I have continued to welcome Zoom’s gentler forms of chaos. In a recent cooking demonstration hosted by the women’s club the Wing, the cookbook author Alison Roman made sardine pasta and lemon tea cake for an audience of three thousand homebound fans. Roman, who was self-quarantining at a friend’s house in Hudson, New York, was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt, and nattered and cooked as viewers exchanged thoughts and questions in the chat sidebar at a pace that bordered on frenzied. Every now and again, Roman would apologize for fumbling her cell phone as she attempted to move it to focus on a generously buttered cake tin or a simmering pan—her face suddenly disappearing or emerging in extreme closeup, or the floor or a wall unexpectedly coming into view. “This is some relatable blair witch project energy,” one viewer wrote. “We out here just enjoying the realness,” another commented.

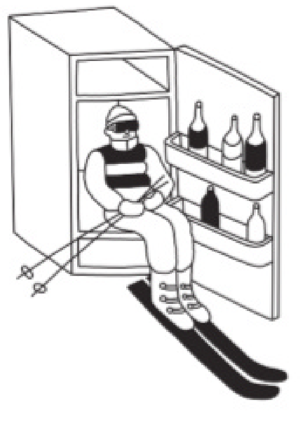

HELLO, ECHO VALLEY! CAN YOU HEAR ME?!
OOH, LISTEN TO ME, I'M DAN! EVERYTHING I HAVE TO SAY IS SOOO IMPORTANT!

Users tend to fondly recall such moments of Zoom disorder. A Twitter acquaintance told me that, while videoconferencing with his boss, he realized that his two dogs were humping behind him. A professor said that, as he was teaching his students a passage from the essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” by the queer literary critic Leo Bersani, the professor’s wife could be heard laughing—she was watching the reality dating show “Love Island” just off camera. Another professor, teaching his first class on Zoom, fell down the stairs in his house while attempting to locate an elusive Wi-Fi signal. A colleague shared a photo of her uncle, a middle-school math teacher, giving a lesson with his laptop propped on his kitchen table atop an economy package of paper towels. One writer told me that, during a Zoom interview with a fashion designer, an unstable connection transformed their voices “into a terrifying, dystopian robot howl talking about quilted jackets.” And a friend said she’d attempted to hold a Zoom dance party but had a hard time synching the music, creating a poignant lag between households.

I was told by one woman that she and her partner accidentally Zoombombed a stranger’s private exercise class, after getting the scheduled time of their own class wrong. “We rolled out our yoga mats, put the laptop on a chair, and logged in to the link,” she said.

"But there was this other woman there already with the teacher. She looked at me and said, 'There's someone in here!'" The snafu, the woman said, "made me feel alive." Meanwhile, a colleague told me that the only thing that has made her laugh lately are the bizarre backgrounds she and her friends have been concocting on Zoom. My daughter and I, after trying out the platform's standard backgrounds, including an idyllic image of the Golden Gate Bridge and an outsized rendering of blades of grass, uploaded our own background: a closeup image of the sleeping face of our ginger cat, Gingy. When, during a conversation with a friend, Gingy walked into the frame, I scooped him up, and the friend took a screenshot of us. The resulting image was not unlike a Dada collage—the real and its representation collapsing, palimpsest-like, into each other, with the laughing faces of my daughter and me sandwiched in between the two.

In some situations, it is preferable that Zoom not be a vector for random bloopers and odd juxtapositions. Dating has been hit hard by the onset of the coronavirus, and apps and experts have come up with strategies to help single people adapt during self-isolation. In late March, Hinge announced that it had partnered with Zoom to create special backgrounds, featuring "popular date spots, such as the bar, the park, and the beach," to make each date feel less like a conference call and more like "the beginning of a romantic journey." Another dating app, Ship, asks users to add a "#DFH" badge to their profile, to indicate that they are ready to "date from home." Marni Battista, an L.A.-based dating and relationship coach, quickly devised a new code of behavior for her clients. Proffering a Zoom link to a potential date, she said, can be a way to advance a texting relationship at a time when an in-person meeting is off the table. "We call it 'throwing the Zoom hankie,'" she said. "Throwing out the possibility of Zoom and seeing if the man picks it up." The impossibility of actual sex, Battista explained, is a boon for many women who are seeking a more serious relationship. "People who are swiping on the apps just for hookups—there's no payoff for them now," she told me. Battista is advising her clients to mimic the atmosphere of a real date as closely as possible: to get dressed up, to order delivery from the same restaurant, to watch a movie together using Netflix's Party plug-in, which allows viewers to interact in a chat box throughout, or to visit an aquarium for a shared virtual tour. "When you do something with someone for the first time, it creates a connection," she told me.



Katie Liptak, a twenty-two-year-old editorial assistant who left New York in mid-March to quarantine at her parents' home, in Washington, D.C., recently scheduled a Zoom date, for which she and her love interest ordered the same kind of pizza and bottle of wine. ("We Cloroxed it down," she said.) "I spent an incredibly long time dressing up for it, and I tried to be strategic about what would look good from the waist up," she told me. "At one point, I almost did the 'America's Next Top Model' trick where you put a binder clip on the back of your top to make it more well fitting, but I was afraid that I would turn around and he would see." The date was fun, and Liptak was considering a follow-up on Zoom; still, it was a strange experience. "It's a sense of removal that reminds you of a Jane Austen novel," she said. The fact that the date took place in her childhood bedroom, three feet from her parents' room, was also peculiar. Plus, she wasn't sure where a relationship could go under these new circumstances. "Sexting is something that me and my friends think about as something that you do after you've already had sex," she said. "Then again, we don't know how long this is going to last. We might need to change the way we act."

The lack of physical presence can't be completely solved—not even by Zoom. Not long ago, I attended a life-drawing class hosted on Zoom by the artist Alex Schmidt, who also serves as the class model. Schmidt, a visual-art M.F.A. candidate at Hunter College, told me that she was refusing to take part in Zoom classes that her program was holding in lieu of in-person teaching, and signed a letter to the school's president asking for a refund or a pause on the semester. "Zoom art classes are not an adequate substitute," she said. "We're talking about something that's so removed from the thing itself."

Nevertheless, Schmidt still enjoys running her own, less formal class remotely. Before the quarantine, the class took place once a month at various New York City locations, but since March 18th Schmidt has held it twice a week, with a suggested donation of fifteen dollars; it is open to "womxn, trans, queer, nb, and gnc friends," and "the rare vetted cis het man . . . with my permission <3." In the class I attended, on a recent Monday afternoon, she disrobed and went through a series of poses of different lengths, from one minute to ten, sometimes holding a prop—a kettlebell, a lamp—while nearly thirty women observed her body closely.

I, too, was drawing, and as I did so I began to notice Schmidt's awareness and use of Zoom's constraints, coming closer to the laptop camera to highlight a certain body part, or moving farther back to reveal the full span of her arms and legs. This made her body seem variously truncated or expansive, not unlike the photographs of stubby but sprawling dolls taken by the Surrealist artist Hans Bellmer, in the nineteen-thirties. I also felt my attention turning to the other students. Arranged in Zoom's gallery view, they seemed worthy of observation as well, and I attempted to capture them in my sketches: one woman drew alongside her five-year-old daughter; another leaned over a sheet of paper on the floor with a cat nuzzling in her lap; a third sat on a sofa, in a black hat, with a sketch pad on her knees. I thought of something I had read online the week before: that the coronavirus pandemic would halt in fourteen days if all of us could freeze in place, six feet away from one another. Here was Zoom, expressing this reality in its own way, if only for a brief time, rendering its atomized subjects into an almost perfect still-life. ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

ABANDONED

Many Syrians thought that the U.S. cared about them. Now they know better.

BY LUKE MOGELSON

President Trump has said of Syria, "Let the other people take care of it now." His repudiation of responsibility is striking, given

THIS PIECE WAS SUPPORTED BY THE PULITZER CENTER.

that during his Administration the U.S. military, in its zeal to destroy ISIS*, has reduced huge swaths of the country to wasteland.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY IVOR PRICKETT

By the time Turkey invaded northern Syria, in October, the Ain Issa refugee camp—twenty miles south of the Turkish border—resembled a small city. In recent years, some fourteen thousand people had moved there, displaced by ISIS, Russian and American air strikes, or the repressive regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The camp had evolved from a few tents in a muddy field into a sprawling grid complete with shops, cafeterias, falafel stands, schools, clinics, mosques, a full-time administration, and offices of more than two dozen local and international N.G.O.s. As news spread of the Turkish offensive, Nashat Khairi, a camp *mukhtar*, or selected representative, urged the roughly thirty families in his section to remain calm. A fruit vender before the war, Khairi had fled his village, in the eastern province of Deir Ezzour, with his wife and seven children, after ISIS captured it, in 2014. They reached Ain Issa three years later. Since then, the camp had come to feel like home. Khairi knew everyone in his section, oversaw the distribution of food rations, registered every birth, and seldom missed a wedding or a funeral. His children received an education and had access to health care. His wife earned a salary as a cleaner. They never went hungry. In cold weather, the camp provided kerosene for their stove, and during the summer they kept their tent cool with a fan powered by a generator. Outside their entryway, Khairi tended a small garden, with neat rows of radishes and bell peppers.

Most important, they were safe. The camp stood on a strategic intersection of the M4 highway, which traverses Syria from the Mediterranean Sea to its border with Iraq. The town of Ain Issa, less than a mile away, was the headquarters of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-led army that had vanquished ISIS in northern and eastern Syria. Also nearby were two large U.S. military bases, which housed hundreds of American troops, contractors, and Foreign Service workers, who had supported the S.D.F. throughout its anti-ISIS campaign. One of the bases, at the former Lafarge Cement Factory, served as the joint-operations center for Kurdish and American commanders.

Khairi assured his fellow-refugees that someone surely had a plan to protect them. A fenced-off part of the camp held more than eight hundred wives and children of killed or captured ISIS militants: if nothing else, Khairi reasoned, the U.S. forces down the road would never let so many high-value detainees escape.

As the Turkish forces approached, however, an alarming development inside the camp deepened the communal panic. Without informing anyone, the management staff, armed guards, and aid workers had all disappeared.

In town, meanwhile, about fifteen hundred S.D.F. members had been frantically organizing a defense. One of the commanders was a twenty-eight-year-old Kurd from Aleppo Province who went by the nom de guerre Brousque—Lightning, in Kurdish. Brousque had been fighting ISIS alongside American troops for six years; his four siblings, including his twenty-one-year-old sister, also served in the S.D.F. In 2017, when the S.D.F. conducted a gruelling urban assault on Raqqa, ISIS's global capital, U.S. Special Forces provided Brousque and other Kurdish commanders with tactical guidance while keeping a safe distance from the combat. Two months into the battle, an S.D.F. fighter a few yards in front of Brousque stepped on a mine and was killed, as was a fighter behind them. The blast knocked Brousque unconscious. He woke up in a hospital, blind, his chest, neck, and face burned and lacerated by shrapnel. By the time he recovered and regained his vision, at the end of 2017, ISIS had been defeated in Raqqa. Brousque was deployed to Tell Abyad, in the far north, where he was assigned five hundred fighters to secure a fifty-mile stretch of the border with Turkey.

Tensions on the border were already high. The S.D.F. had grown out of the P.K.K., a Kurdish separatist movement in Turkey that had waged a decades-long insurgency. The U.S. military's collaboration with the S.D.F. enraged Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. "A country we call an ally is insisting on forming a terror army on our border," Erdoğan declared, shortly after Brousque arrived in Tell Abyad. "Our mission is to strangle it before it is even born." Turkey had twice carried out major cross-border operations to seize Kurdish towns and cities in Syria, and further attacks seemed inevitable.

Then, last August, the U.S. brokered a deal between Turkey and the S.D.F. A demilitarized buffer zone along the Syrian side of the border required Brousque to dismantle all his fortifications, seal a tunnel system that his fighters had constructed, pull out of Tell Abyad, and move ten miles deeper into S.D.F. territory. In exchange, Erdoğan pledged not to invade. Brousque was skeptical of this promise, but he had faith in the Americans, who, according to the agreement, would act as guarantors. "We'd become good friends," he told me, during a visit I made to Syria this winter. "I assumed that the advice they were giving us was in our interest."

After the S.D.F. withdrew from the border, Turkish and American forces began conducting patrols and aerial surveillance together. Though no Kurds crossed into Turkey, Erdoğan soon dismissed the buffer zone as inadequate, and insisted on expanding it. In September, before the United Nations General Assembly, in New York, he announced his intention to annex more than five thousand square miles of Kurdish land, creating a "peace corridor" where two million Syrian refugees living in Turkey could be resettled. The refugees would be overwhelmingly Arab and from other parts of Syria. The southern edge of the corridor would encompass Ain Issa, Khairi's refugee camp, and the Lafarge Cement Factory. International observers denounced the scheme as a flagrant attempt at demographic engineering that was certain to produce conflict and humanitarian disaster.

Two weeks later, the White House issued a press release stating that President Donald Trump and Erdoğan had spoken on the phone. While the details of the conversation have not been made public, it was a triumph for Erdoğan. "Turkey will soon be moving forward with its long-planned operation into northern Syria," the press release explained, adding that American troops "will no longer be in the immediate area."

After the U.S. vacated the buffer zone, Turkish jets, drones, and artillery pummelled Tell Abyad and other border cities. The S.D.F., which has no air assets, petitioned the U.S. to impose a no-fly

PANOS

zone, but the Americans refused. Turkey's ground forces consisted mostly of Syrian Arab mercenaries, many of whom had previously belonged to jihadist groups with a profound animosity toward the Kurds. As these militias pushed south, in armored vehicles, nearly two hundred thousand civilians fled from their path. Reports of war crimes, such as summary executions, followed the advance. Later, the senior American diplomat in Syria, William V. Roeback, wrote an internal memo lamenting that U.S. personnel had "stood by and watched" an "intention-laced effort at ethnic cleansing."

On October 12th, a Turkish-backed militia reached the M4, where it intercepted an S.U.V. carrying Hevrin Khalaf, a prominent female Kurdish politician. She was beaten to death. Videos posted on Twitter show the militants murdering a second unarmed passenger as well. "Another fleeing pig has been liquidated," one of the assailants proclaims.

The next day, Turkish forces in the open desert north of the highway began shelling Ain Issa, where Brousque was told to hold the line.

"The only thing between us was the camp," he recalled.

In Nashat Khairi's section, a troubling rumor had begun to circulate. The Kurds were said to have turned in desperation to the Assad regime, which was now sending reinforcements to Ain Issa. For many of the refugees, who'd come to the camp seeking asylum from the regime, this was as distressing as the Turkish offensive. Still, most people were reluctant to leave without their I.D.s, which were locked in the camp's administrative offices.

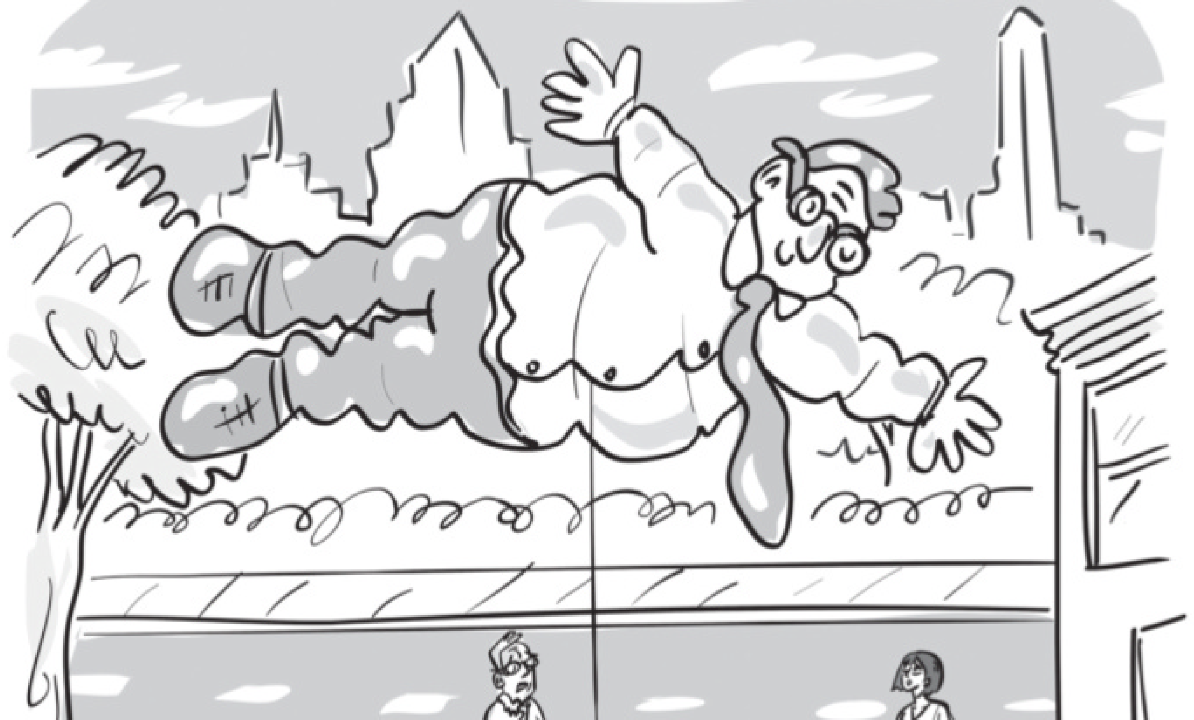
As the sound of shelling and machine-gun fire neared, another danger materialized. The ISIS-affiliated detainees had somehow got out. The S.D.F. later blamed the breach on a riot provoked by Turkish air strikes. But I met multiple witnesses who claimed to have seen S.D.F. fighters arrive in a pickup and release the detainees. This seems plausible. Much of the Western criticism of the Turkish invasion focussed on the possibility that tens of thousands of ISIS militants and relatives might escape Kurdish custody. The S.D.F., realizing that the world cared more about the spectre of terrorists on the loose than about the killing of Kurds, promoted false accounts about Kurdish prison guards being sent to the Turkish border. Although these stories were untrue, an S.D.F. spokesman told me, they "made the international community pay attention."

From Ain Issa, most of the detainees ran north, toward the Turks. Others stayed in the camp, infiltrating the regular population and adding to its paranoia and confusion. Several people told me that some of the fleeing ISIS wives cried out, "The night is coming!"

Not long after this, a convoy of armored vehicles flying American flags approached on the highway, from the Lafarge Cement Factory. When the convoy stopped in front of the camp, relief washed over Khairi. "We were so happy," he remembered. "We thought they were coming to save us." Khairi told his children that everything was going to be O.K. Then the convoy started moving again.

Khairi and the other refugees did not know that Trump had ordered an immediate withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Syria, and that the convoy now receding out of sight was headed for Iraq. But they understood that it wasn't coming back. "Everyone went crazy," Khairi said. "It was total anarchy." People swarmed the administrative offices, shattering the windows, breaking down the doors, and lighting them on fire. Fighting persisted between the Turks and the S.D.F., and at some point Khairi's eight-year-old niece, Amal, was struck by a stray bullet. Her older brother, Ali Mohammad, took her to the hospital in town. The incident aggravated the hysteria, and soon nearly everyone poured out through the camp's main gate. Unlike the detainees, most of the refugees went south—some in cars, others on foot—unsure where they were going or what they would do. When Ali Mohammad returned to the camp with Amal, she was dead.

Khairi and his relatives stayed to bury her. In a clearing outside a mosque, they dug a grave and marked it with a stone on either end. The sun was setting. No one had eaten in several days. Khairi set out to scavenge for food. It looked as if a tornado had descended



"Whenever I'm feeling down, I throw myself a parade."

on the camp. He marvelled at how quickly everything had changed.

The next day, he hired a truck. "It was very difficult for me to leave," he told me. "It was the same as when we left our village, in Deir Ezzour." As the truck headed south—in the same direction from which, five years earlier, they had fled—Khairi and his family found themselves, once again, homeless and running from the war.

The departing Americans, after their brief pause outside the camp, proceeded east on the M4, through the middle of the battle, with Turkish forces on their left and the S.D.F. on their right. Both sides stopped fighting to let them pass, then resumed.

In the end, Brousque and the S.D.F. held on to Ain Issa, preventing the Turks from crossing the highway. It took the Americans three days to transport all their equipment and heavy weaponry out of Syria. Locals hurled rocks at them and called them traitors. After the Lafarge Cement Factory was abandoned, two American F-15s launched missiles at it. A U.S. Army spokesman explained that the purpose of the strike was "to reduce the facility's military usefulness"—a stunning conclusion to what had arguably been America's most successful military partnership in the post-9/11 era.

That partnership had begun in 2014, when ISIS stormed across northern Syria and the only meaningful armed resistance it encountered was a small band of Kurdish men and women who called themselves the People's Protection Units, or Y.P.G. (The Syrian government had pulled most of its troops out of the region two years earlier, to quell uprisings elsewhere in the country.) Thousands of ISIS militants eventually besieged Kobani, the home town of the Y.P.G.'s commander, Ferhat Abdi Sahin, better known as Mazloum. A massacre appeared at hand. When I met Mazloum, in February, he recalled telling his fighters that under no circumstances were they to let ISIS advance beyond the street where he grew up. ISIS captured his house twice, and, according to Mazloum, both times the Y.P.G. took it back. By then, the U.S. had begun providing air support to the embattled Kurds; Mazloum said that American commanders advised him to surrender Kobani, and offered to cover his retreat. He refused. When ISIS seized his house a third time, he radioed its coördinates to the Americans and asked them to destroy it. "That was when the momentum changed," Mazloum said. "After they bombed my house, we retook the neighborhood, and from there we kept advancing." The Kurds eventually pushed ISIS out of Kobani, at which point the U.S. proposed to continue backing them from the air, as long as they pursued ISIS on the ground.

This must have been a strange moment for Mazloum, because the U.S. had once considered him a terrorist. He was born in 1967, shortly after the creation of the Syrian Arab Republic, which institutionalized the repression of Kurds. At the age of thirteen, he was imprisoned for reading a book in Kurdish, and as a student at Aleppo University he was arrested four times, for "political activities." Meanwhile, in Turkey, whose government had enacted severe anti-Kurd policies of its own, the P.K.K. had launched a guerrilla war against the state. The group's founder, Abdullah Ocalan, was forced to flee to Syria, where Mazloum's father, a physician, befriended him. Some Turks now refer to Mazloum, derisively, as Ocalan's "spiritual son."

After graduating with a degree in architecture, Mazloum joined the P.K.K. He rose through its ranks during the eighties and nineties, while the group carried out kidnappings, assassinations, bombings, and suicide attacks in Turkey. The U.S. officially designated the P.K.K. a terrorist organization in 1997, and a year and a half later the C.I.A. helped Turkey capture Ocalan. He was imprisoned on a small island in the Sea of Marmara, where he remains today.

In 2011, at the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, Mazloum founded the Y.P.G. as a Syrian branch of the P.K.K. Three years later, when American officials offered to support the Y.P.G., they insisted that it break ties with its parent group. Mazloum says that his organization is not connected to the P.K.K. That is preposterous; what is debatable is the nature of the connection. As the Y.P.G. recaptured more territory from ISIS, it absorbed tens of thousands of non-Kurdish fighters—Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, and Turkmen—and, in 2015, it rebranded itself as the Syrian Democratic Forces. Recruits were still indoctrinated in Ocalan's anti-Turkish ideology, however, and P.K.K. leaders quietly installed themselves in Syria, consolidating a shadow authority in both the S.D.F. and the emerging bureaucracy responsible for liberated areas. This bureaucracy—the Autonomous Administration of

GODZILLA vs. HIMSELF
I shouldn't stomp so much... but it's my nature! I'm GODZILLA!! Not BAMBI!!!

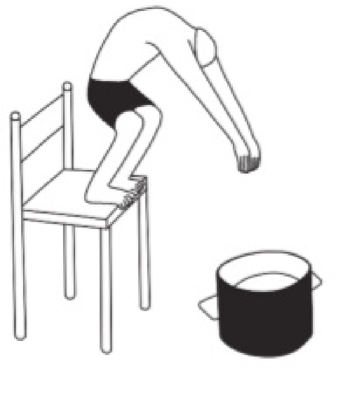
North and East Syria—now governs about a third of the country, garnering considerable revenue, from taxes and trade, which, many experts believe, directly finances the P.K.K.

For the Americans, the S.D.F.'s proficiency against ISIS eclipsed concerns about antagonizing Turkey, a NATO ally. As the war against ISIS progressed, the Kurds, despite their fidelity to a designated terrorist organization, developed an extraordinarily copacetic relationship with U.S. troops and personnel. At the command level, this symbiosis seems to have been largely thanks to General Mazloum, whose competence and reliability permitted American officials to overlook his political associations. Brett McGurk, a former special Presidential envoy for the coalition fighting ISIS, told me, "Mazloum proved himself to be incredibly effective militarily—and diplomatically, bringing tens of thousands of Arabs into the force. The results spoke for themselves." Notwithstanding a lifelong devotion to Kurdish rights, Mazloum was crucial in uniting the S.D.F.'s diverse non-Kurdish factions, especially rivalrous Arab tribes. "He's pragmatic and subtle," McGurk said. "He became a trusted interlocutor."

Today, Mazloum commands more than a hundred thousand fighters, fewer than half of whom are Kurds. His astonishing trajectory, from the leader of a fledgling militia to the general of a multiethnic army controlling a large swath of Syria, has endowed him with an almost mythical stature. "People see him as a kind of prophet," a Kurdish friend of mine said. Some Americans express a similar awe. "Mazloum is the George Washington of the Kurds," a U.S. Army major told me.

Erdoğan, for his part, has issued a warrant for Mazloum's arrest through Interpol, and placed a bounty on his head. For my meeting with General Mazloum, I was instructed to show up at an S.D.F. base; I was then escorted to a remote compound on a hill overlooking wetlands. Guards paced the terraces of a luxurious residence with patios and an expansive swimming pool—the Hollywood version of a narco mansion, except that everyone was nice. Mazloum, the only person on the property in uniform, received me in a small, austere room with a few couches and coffee tables. Soft-spoken and clean-shaven, with graying black hair and an open face, he radiated the guileless enthusiasm of an idealist and the imperturbability of a veteran commander.

It is a sign of the insular and secretive culture of the P.K.K. that, until last year, few people outside Syria had ever heard of Mazloum. Throughout the Raqqa offensive, he avoided the press and remained sequestered with his American counterparts inside the Lafarge Cement Factory. His first public appearance came last March, after the S.D.F. captured Deir Ezzour, ISIS's last redoubt in Syria, erasing from the map a caliphate that once encompassed more than thirty thousand square miles. At a choreographed ceremony, Mazloum briefly addressed international media outlets that had covered the battle. When we spoke, he explained to me that it would have been inappropriate for a subordinate of his to have declared such a momentous victory. But his decision to step into the spotlight was also tactical: in addition to declaring victory, he implored the U.S. not to abandon Syria prematurely. Warning that ISIS and Al Qaeda still posed a danger to the "whole world," he asked for continued military support, "in order to begin a new phase in the fight against terrorism."



His worry was understandable. Three months earlier, in December, 2018, while the S.D.F. was still engaged in brutal daily combat in Deir Ezzour, Trump had declared, on Twitter, "We have won against ISIS." Praising the "soldiers who have been killed fighting for our country," he directed the Pentagon to withdraw all its forces from Syria within thirty days. (Two U.S. service members had been killed in Syria, compared with more than ten thousand men and women in the S.D.F.) Defense Secretary James Mattis resigned in protest, as did Brett McGurk. After Republican senators joined the backlash, Trump relented on his timetable. But he never rescinded his order to withdraw.

When I asked Mazloum if U.S. military and civilian leaders had begun preparing him for their departure after Trump's announcement, he said absolutely not. "Basically, they told us it wasn't going to happen," Mazloum said. The first official warning he received to the contrary came in October, when the ranking U.S. general for the Middle East called to inform him—on the same day the rest of the world found out—that a Turkish incursion was imminent and that the U.S. would do nothing to impede it. (A U.S. Army spokesman said, "We decline specific comment on prior conversations between senior leaders.")

The disaster that subsequently befell northern Syria has been widely attributed to Trump's capitulation to Erdoğan, which many people view as a gross betrayal of the Kurds. Senator Mitt Romney, raising the prospect of a congressional investigation into Trump's decision, called it "a bloodstain on the annals of American history." Such criticism hinges on the seemingly self-evident notion that the Kurds, after defeating ISIS at great cost, had earned a debt of loyalty from the U.S. Certainly, this was Mazloum's understanding. Trump, however, never suggested that it was *his* understanding. Rather, it appears that U.S. commanders and diplomats made commitments that contradicted his explicit statements—imparting a false sense of security to the Kurds that ultimately harmed them. Mazloum told me that last summer, when he agreed to pull back his forces from the Turkish border, the Americans on the ground in Syria assured him, "As long as we're here, Turkey will not attack you."

By all accounts, these Americans genuinely believed in their partnership with the Kurds and were anguished by the way it ended. The question is whether they did the Kurds a disservice by not adequately explaining to them that the collective will of U.S. institutions could be instantly abrogated by a Presidential tweet—and that the posting of such a tweet was likely. In Syria, perhaps more than anywhere else, the unprecedented friction between the White House and its foreign-policy apparatus is on stark display. Almost every Kurd I met, including Mazloum, distinguished between the U.S. military and its Commander-in-Chief. "After all the fighting we did together, we had lots of trust in the Americans," Mazloum said. "We never imagined everything could change in just two days." After a pause, he qualified the criticism: "We know this was a political decision. We still have confidence in our American brothers-in-arms."

In 2015, when Bashar al-Assad appeared to be losing his grip on the country, Vladimir Putin came to his aid. A prodigious Russian air campaign turned the tide of the civil war. In addition to enabling regime atrocities, Russia has killed thousands of Syrian civilians. Russian security contractors have also committed horrific crimes. A 2017 video showed Russians murdering a Syrian with a sledgehammer, then decapitating him and lighting his corpse on fire. However problematic the U.S. intervention in Syria has been, it would be specious to equate Russian and American conduct in the country.

Assad and the Russians have made it clear that their long-term goal is the return of "total state control" in Syria, including in the territory captured from ISIS by the S.D.F. Nevertheless, the day before Turkey attacked Brousque's forces in Ain Issa and U.S. troops began leaving the Lafarge Cement Factory, Mazloum met with representatives from Russia and the Assad regime. The next afternoon, government military units returned to parts of northern Syria for the first time in seven years. In an editorial in *Foreign Policy*, Mazloum described his choice as one between "painful compromises" and "the genocide of our people."

During the next week, a cascade of events upended the strategic balance in Syria and, by extension, throughout the Middle East. Putin invited Erdoğan to Sochi, where the two leaders signed a treaty that halted the Turkish offensive while implicitly ceding to Turkey the land it had already taken—nearly a thousand square miles. (An earlier ceasefire, negotiated by Vice-President Mike Pence, had been neither respected by Turkey nor enforced by the U.S.) Mazloum agreed to relinquish his remaining border positions, and Russia replaced the U.S. as the neutral mediator of the buffer zone. Russian troops also joined regime forces on the S.D.F.'s new front line along the territory annexed by Turkey. Near Ain Issa, Russian soldiers commandeered the largest U.S. airbase in Syria. Russian state television broadcast video footage of American medical supplies, empty bunkhouses, and shipping containers marked "PROPERTY OF U.S. ARMY."

When I visited Ain Issa, in February, Russian military vehicles entered and exited a former U.S. outpost on the edge of town. A large Russian flag waved on the roof of a former U.S. guard tower. It was visible from the building where I met with Brousque, who now coördinates with Russian soldiers instead of with U.S. Special Forces. It wasn't the same, Brousque said: "We fought alongside the Americans. They ate with us. They laughed and joked with us. We had the feeling that we belonged to the same team. It's not like that with the Russians." Brousque recalled a celebration at the end of a training exercise, during which American troops sang and danced to traditional Kurdish music with their S.D.F. comrades. Smiling at the memory, he said, "The Russians would never do that."

Earthen berms and trenches lined the north side of the M4. A few hundred feet beyond them were the Turkish-backed militias. Before October, downtown Ain Issa had been a bustling souk. Now it was deserted. Regime soldiers walked by shuttered stores, garages, barbershops, and restaurants. When I introduced myself and tried to ask them questions, they nervously hurried off. They wore mismatched uniforms and tattered sneakers, and several of them looked underfed. Of the handful of soldiers I managed to interview, all but one had been conscripted. None was armed, and I later learned that the S.D.F. had prohibited them from carrying weapons in town.

The regime forces that Mazloum al-

THE LONGER PRAYER

Field of silos, of did we keep enough
To keep us through; walk the fence line where
The middle rail broke, reset the traps

By the manger. Did we pay enough
Attention; should have done with less, put up more,
Learned the ditch, repeated the row, the glare

Of sun in your eyes, again at your back, the undersong
Of the sickle to rise, and lower, the tractor
That still runs. Forgive the mind its winter, its gnaw—

The softening ground waits; the ridge
Where the sky steeples with spire, windvane,
To receive what we cannot handle, in sight

As elsewhere small is the first light
To light, each room becoming many
Houses filled with their own good doings until astonished

You also remain. The unlost birds come back
To crown the trees and do not wonder
How each branch bursts into again, how free fall

Is ever the stars. Come home changed
Or be changed; every harvest will be
Weighed against the still to be done.

—*Sophie Cabot Black*

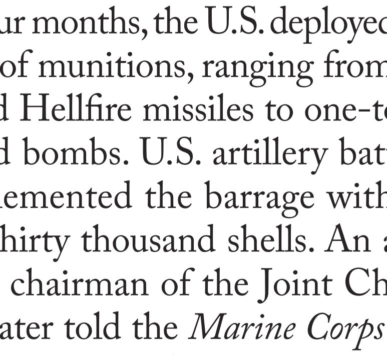
lowed back into Kurdish territory are restricted to the frontiers and pose little danger to the S.D.F. By stopping the Turkish offensive, securing Russian protection, and limiting the deployment of regime troops, Mazloum prevented northern Syria from descending into chaos. But this emergency diplomacy grants only a temporary reprieve. The longer the Kurds must contend with an existential threat from Turkey in the north, the less able they will be to defend their Arab satellites in the south—Deir Ezzour and Raqqa—from Russia and Assad. This secondary effect of the U.S. withdrawal has the potential to become yet another catastrophe, for yet another population.

To the extent that Trump has articulated a coherent policy in Syria, it reflects his view that the country is irredeemably doomed and therefore no longer our concern. "Syria was lost long ago," he said last year. "We're talking about sand and death." Trump is not the first President to cite the scale and the complexity of the Syrian war as a justification for American inconstancy. In 2013, when the regime killed more than a thousand civilians with sarin gas, Barack Obama, leery of being drawn into the conflict, backed away from punitive strikes, despite having declared a "red line" on the use of chemical weapons. The regime, uninhibited by a fear of American repercussions, has since conducted additional gas attacks and wantonly slaughtered tens of thousands of its citizens by other means. One could argue that Obama's painstakingly considered inaction enabled more violence and misery than any of Trump's carelessly impulsive actions. At the same time, Trump's repudiation of American responsibility to Syria is harder to rationalize, given that during his time in office the U.S., in its zeal to exterminate ISIS, has reduced parts of the country to wasteland. Nowhere is this more true than in the city of Raqqa.

The truck that Nashat Khairi hired to take his family away from Ain Issa stopped ten miles north of Raqqa. Khairi, his wife, and their seven children unloaded their belongings on the roadside: mattresses, blankets, pots and pans, their fan and stove. All around them, thousands of refugees from the camp had pitched tents in empty fields, amid grazing livestock. Khairi told his family that they would not be staying there. After a night under the stars, he hitched a ride to Raqqa to look for someplace with a roof.

He discovered a city whose utter decimation might be unique in this century. As a candidate, Trump had vowed to "bomb the shit out of" ISIS, and, almost as soon as he entered the Oval Office, Raqqa afforded him the opportunity. By the summer of 2017, the S.D.F. had encircled the city, which ISIS militants prepared to defend with suicide bombers, an elaborate tunnel system, and ubiquitous I.E.D.s. Because the S.D.F. lacked heavy weaponry and armored vehicles, the offensive relied on U.S. air strikes. For four months, the U.S. deployed thousands of munitions, ranging from laser-guided Hellfire missiles to one-ton unguided bombs. U.S. artillery battalions complemented the barrage with more than thirty thousand shells. An adviser to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff later told the *Marine Corps Times*, "Every minute of every hour, we were putting some kind of fire on ISIS in Raqqa." I was shocked, while covering the battle, by what seemed to be a strategy of physical annihilation applied against a city that still harbored a significant civilian population. One front-line S.D.F. commander told me that he called in U.S. air strikes on solitary gunmen.

When the last ISIS holdouts surrendered, the layout of the city was unrecognizable. Months of labor were required just to uncover the streets. The effort was overseen by the Raqqa Civil Council, a municipal authority established by the Kurds which currently operates under the Autonomous Administration. The U.S. supplied excavators and paid the salaries of more than six hundred local workers. Large rig-mounted jackhammers smashed the vast mountains of concrete into manageable pieces, which were then used to fill in craters, seal ISIS tunnels, and reinforce levees on the Euphrates River. Smaller slabs were pulverized and repurposed as cement. Thousands of bodies were extracted, as were tens of thousands of mines. Once the main arteries were passable, water stations and basic plumbing were installed. People started moving back.



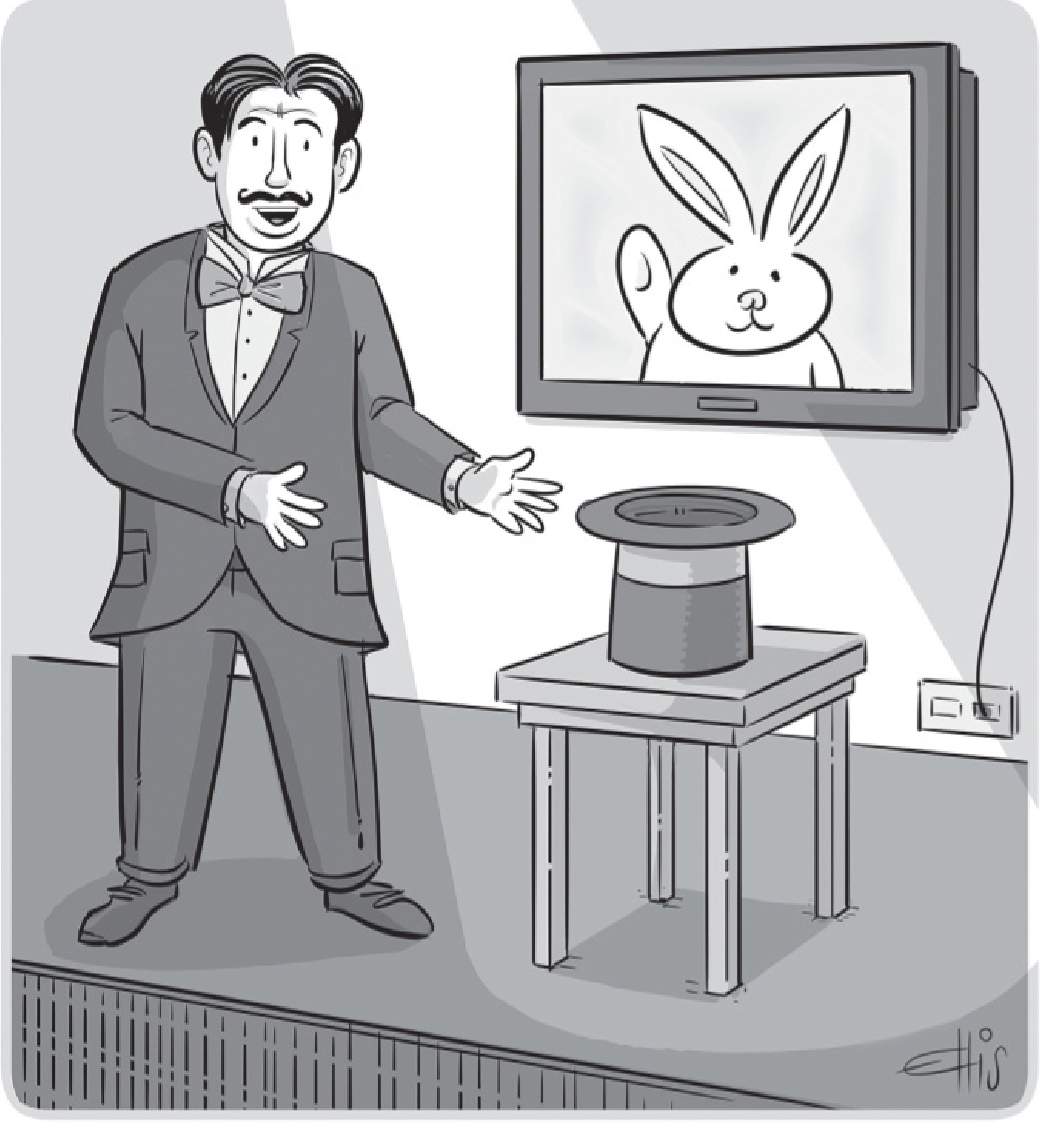
"It changed from a dead city to a city with a pulse," Ibrahim Ibn Khalil, the former director of the Civil Council's reconstruction committee, told me this winter. We met in a small café in downtown Raqqa, near the central roundabout where ISIS once performed public beheadings and crucifixions. Ibn Khalil, in a wheelchair, held a hookah pipe in his left hand and a cappuccino in his right. In January, 2018, an assassin had entered his house and shot him six times in the chest; ISIS claimed responsibility. Doctors saved Ibn Khalil's life, but three bullets remain lodged in his back, and no hospital in Syria is equipped to take them out. Ibn Khalil told me that the American officials who had encouraged the development of the Civil Council had promised to secure him a visa so that he could undergo surgery in the U.S. But they never followed through. "It's very disappointing for me," he said. "This happened because I was working with the Americans."

His personal disappointment echoes a larger one. Because the U.N. respects the sovereignty of the Syrian regime, and the regime does not authorize aid delivery to areas controlled by the S.D.F., the U.S. initially assumed the financial burden for Raqqa's recovery. But, seven months after Ibn Khalil was shot, Trump suspended the Syria budgets of the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development. "Let the other people take care of it now," he had said. "We're going to get back to our country, where we belong." Although Gulf states and European nations made up for the shortfall, which totalled around two hundred and thirty million dollars—about a quarter of what's been raised to repair Notre-Dame, in Paris—the disruption hampered progress, and many locals lost their jobs. Five months later, when Trump first threatened to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, the Americans advising Ibn Khalil's team—public-health, water-sanitation, and demining experts—were evacuated from the country. Those who eventually returned were confined to U.S. military bases far from Raqqa, and in October they left Syria for good. Rubble, bombs, and bodies still litter the city—unexploded ordnance continues to kill and maim people every week, typically children—and no government has offered any support for the monumental undertaking of fixing damaged buildings and erecting new ones. In Ibn Khalil's opinion, "The world has betrayed the people of Raqqa."

The comprehensiveness of the destruction can be visually disorienting. It's as if the cumulative energy of the American bombardment had scrambled the normal order of things, leaving behind an Escher-like reality to which the mind needs time to adjust. Concrete staircases dangle vertically from twisted rebar; cars lie upside down; roofs jut at weird angles; slabs of concrete undulate like rumpled cloth; trees cower from old blasts. On every surface, projectiles have gouged holes of different shapes and sizes; entire blocks are sheared off at the top. Some buildings appear to defy physics, frozen mid-fall. Others have been trucked away, the only trace of them a square of dirt.

And yet, remarkably, the obliterated city abounds with activity. Because most of Raqqa was wrecked from above, the ground levels of taller structures often survived more or less intact. Many streets are lined with shops and restaurants that have reopened under multiple gutted floors. Less obvious is where everybody lives. For several days, I couldn't figure it out. Then one evening, while we were driving around, my translator—a friend from Iraq who'd never been to Raqqa before—said, "Look at all the people." Although solar-powered L.E.D. lamps illuminate a few main boulevards, and commercial enterprises run diesel generators, Raqqa is eerily dark at night. But now I saw what he was talking about: scattered throughout the city, dim points of light.

One of these belonged to Nashat Khairi. Three days after his family left Ain Issa, he found a cinder-block room on Raqqa's northern outskirts, near train tracks whose rails had been removed by scavengers, and rusty freight cars converted into shelters. The room was too small for his seven children, so Khairi installed the family's tent outside, and linked the two entrances with a tarp, thereby doubling the square footage. Between the stakes, he planted another garden with radishes and bell peppers. "This tent is dear to my heart," he told me when I visited.



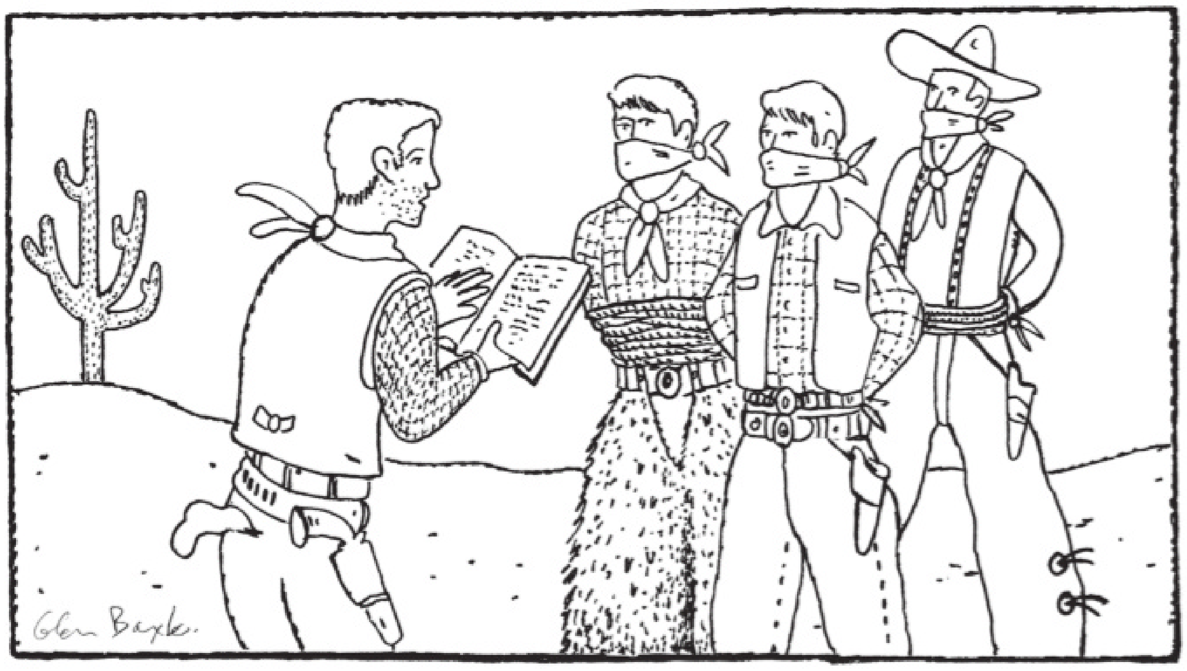
As we discussed what had happened in October, Khairi kept referring to a compact agenda that he kept in his pocket. The agenda, so old and weathered that most of its pages had detached, contained copious notes from his years as a *mukhtar* at the Ain Issa camp: the names, ages, and phone numbers of everyone in his section; the rations to which each family was entitled; the locations of tents with infants needing formula; dates of marriages and deaths. Between the pages were battered business cards—contact information for N.G.O.s and aid workers who had long since quit the region. Picking up a card that had fallen out, Khairi told me it belonged to a doctor who used to perform circumcisions for newborns in the camp. He carefully returned the card to its place.

Khairi had found a job helping a Raqqa merchant sell secondhand blankets, and earned around three dollars a week. (I had first met him, by chance, while he was unfolding his wares on the sidewalk one morning.) Although he often had to choose between food and kerosene—winter temperatures frequently dropped below freezing—he considered himself lucky. Thousands of refugees who had fled Ain Issa were still living in the fields north of Raqqa. The former manager of the camp told me that there is no plan to help them. When my translator and I visited the makeshift settlement, a crowd of women swarmed our car, shouting, "We're dying of hunger!" and "Why isn't anyone coming?" We had to drive away when they tried to force open our doors. A villager who lived nearby later told me, "They don't even have water. Their husbands are in Raqqa looking for work." He added, "When it rains, these fields will all be flooded."

The reason none of these people had moved into Raqqa was that the city was already full. Around a hundred thousand people are thought to live there. In addition to former residents returning home, and people fleeing the Turkish invasion, the city has been inundated with Syrians displaced by the regime—from Aleppo, Hama, Deir Ezzour, and elsewhere. Every habitable niche has been claimed. After a week or so, I learned to identify signs of human life within the ruins: drying laundry, bricked-up holes, plastic-covered windows, and small gray satellite dishes affixed to half-collapsing walls. (The Civil Council sells generator-powered electricity for about two dollars a week, and everyone, no matter how destitute, seemed to have a television with several hundred channels.) Sometimes tower complexes were so thoroughly damaged that only a single apartment retained a modicum of structural integrity. One day, I noticed a man sweeping debris from the roof of a three-story building whose top and bottom floors had no exterior walls; he lived in the middle. When he invited me inside, I found the living room impeccably restored, with plush carpets and decorative plaster molding. A polished wood-and-glass display cabinet had survived the battle; on its shelves, porcelain figurines and delicate teacups were arranged on lace doilies.

Most people in Raqqa live in far more squalid and hazardous conditions. Large families are often crowded into one or two rooms with bowed ceilings and bulging walls—masses of blasted concrete literally pressing in on them. Given the state of these apartments, I was surprised to discover that there are few squatters in Raqqa. Almost everyone I met, including Khairi, paid rent.

At one of the dozens of real-estate offices downtown, Hassan Yassin, a middle-aged agent wearing a kaffiyeh and traditional tribal robes, told me, "We've never seen such a high demand." Yassin said that property owners can usually be tracked down, and if they are dead, imprisoned, or abroad, relatives suffice. Prices range from about ten dollars a month, in the suburbs, to as much as thirty dollars a month in the popular Al Firdous neighborhood. (Al Firdous is no less damaged than anywhere else, but it boasts the Electric Park of Raqqa, whose Ferris wheel and bumper cars withstood two air strikes, and Rashid Stadium. A former ISIS torture center, the stadium has a synthetic track that people now jog around.) Yassin waved a stack of papers—his backlog of would-be tenants seeking accommodation. "It's like that everywhere in Raqqa," he said.


ON TUESDAYS, THE SHERIFF LIKED TO SHARE HIS LYRIC POETRY WITH US

During the day, the city resonates with the din of banging hammers, power tools, and machinery. Wood shops fabricate furniture; boom trucks and bulldozers clog the roads; venders hawk salvaged brick, tile, metal, and marble. But almost none of this industry is geared toward creating new structures. At a high school flattened by an air strike, a crew of workers contracted by the Civil Council explained their work to me. As backhoes clawed through heaps of concrete, raking out gnarled rebar, laborers fed the steel rods through a straightening machine. Earthmovers then exhumed the foundation, so that the school could be resurrected on its original footprint. This final step, however, was merely theoretical: no building had occurred on any of the sites the crew had prepared.

The U.S. and its allies have refused to fund construction projects in Syria as long as Assad remains in power. "It's become a collective consensus among donors that we will not do reconstruction in Syria," a senior humanitarian officer told me. " 'Reconstruction' is a dirty word." The ostensible reason for withholding such assistance is to incentivize the resolution of a U.N.-sponsored peace process. But the process has been stalled for years, and few people expect it to succeed. The Western aversion to durable investment in Syria more likely arises from a broad but unspoken recognition that Assad is winning the war. "It's political," the humanitarian officer said. "We don't want to do anything that will eventually benefit the regime."

Even though the State Department and U.S.A.I.D. no longer have personnel in Syria, they still determine how the majority of foreign funding is spent there. The U.S. government distinguishes between "stabilization" and "reconstruction," allowing the former and proscribing the latter. Stabilization projects are subject to guidelines that forbid, among other things, the building of load-bearing walls. In practical terms, this means that, if a school was minimally damaged by an American air strike, the U.S. can finance basic refurbishments, such as replacing doorframes or applying new paint. But if the school was destroyed—as the vast majority of structures in Raqqa were—the U.S., as a matter of policy, cannot replace it. The Europeans and the Gulf states generally follow the same rule.

For even these limited interventions, only public structures are eligible. Since the Second World War, the U.S. has rarely paid directly for the reconstruction of private homes in any conflict; the crucial difference in Syria is the absence of other actors to provide such aid. In Iraq, the U.N. has rebuilt more

*"I'm hoping that once we enter the Bronze Age
I'll be able to get a better likeness of you."*

than twenty-five thousand residences that were destroyed during the war against ISIS, and the World Bank is funding major infrastructure projects. In Raqqa, deferring to the regime, neither institution has done anything.

Yassin told me that, among the buildings where he had placed renters, "we estimate that at least seventy per cent of them will have to be torn down—they're not safe." I asked what will happen to their occupants if that happens. "They'll have to go somewhere else," he said.

In Raqqa, you can't walk down the street without encountering people whose lives have been shattered by American arms. An investigation by Amnesty International found that the U.S.-led coalition killed at least sixteen hundred civilians in the city; locals say that the actual toll is much higher. Although American officials like to claim that the U.S. "liberated" Raqqa, nobody I met there felt liberated.

One afternoon, in a neighborhood adjacent to Al Firdous, we passed a yellow taxi parked outside a building that looked as if it had been stepped on by a giant. A sheet hung over the doorway. When my translator asked if anyone was home, a middle-aged man with gray hair and a gray mustache emerged. His name was Mustafa al-Hamad. We followed him into a room with crumbling walls lined with blankets and pillows, where we were joined by his wife, Namat.

They were originally from Aleppo, where Hamad had managed a shoe store. In 2012, the revolution turned violent in their neighborhood, and they moved with their four children to Raqqa. The war had not yet reached Raqqa, and Namat's family lived there. Hamad bought a taxi and began working as a driver. He and Namat had another daughter. After ISIS captured Raqqa, in 2014, they considered fleeing—but nowhere they could go was significantly safer. Two years later, the S.D.F. began its advance on the city, and ISIS, recognizing the need for human shields, prohibited civilians from leaving.

In 2017, as the S.D.F. approached Raqqa, the already ferocious deluge of munitions intensified. That July, a shell or an air strike killed Namat's brother, Khalid. She and Hamad resolved to get out. The taxi could fit only them, their five children, and Khalid's thirteen-year-old son, whom they had adopted. Hamad promised to return for Namat's mother, sister, nieces, and nephews. They left at night, following a rutted dirt road through the wetlands on the edge of the Euphrates. Eventually, they arrived at a line of vehicles—other residents trying to escape the city—backed up from where the road disappeared into a marsh. ISIS militants had blown up a levee, flooding the way.

About a dozen men were helping people move their cars, one after another, across several hundred feet of water. "If we hear a plane, we have to go," they told Hamad. The Americans, fearing that ISIS militants were sneaking out of Raqqa, had dropped leaflets threatening to bomb anyone attempting to ford the river.

When it was Hamad's turn, he and his two teen-age sons got out and pushed. Namat and her daughters waded alongside them. The water rose to Namat's chest; she held her infant above her head. They made it across, and the next day reached a town under the control of the S.D.F.

Hamad did not go back for Namat's mother and sister—to do so would have been suicidal. Both women, along with four of Namat's nieces and nephews, were later killed in an air strike. As soon as Raqqa was accessible, Hamad and Namat visited the site, hoping to recover their bodies. There was too much rubble.

The day after I met Hamad, he led me and my translator to the place where he had pushed his taxi across the marsh. The dirt road was still flooded, and looked exactly as he had described it. On the way back to the city, we stopped at a small scrap yard. In a wooden shack surrounded by rusty engine parts, shutters, gears, wheels, and other refuse, we found the young owner sitting on a crate, drinking tea with one of his suppliers. While I spoke to the owner about his business—there had been a brief boom, he said, but the city was soon picked over—the supplier regarded me suspiciously. He was missing several teeth, and cotton spilled from holes all over his dirty coat. He grew agitated as I continued asking questions, and finally interrupted me. "During the battle, a mortar killed my wife and three of my daughters," he said. "Another one of my daughters lost her leg."

The man, named Hussein Ahmad, invited me to his house, where I met his ten-year-old daughter, Fatma, who is now in a wheelchair. Fatma recalled cooking dinner with her mother and sisters when a shell tore through their kitchen. Rima was fifteen, Amira fourteen, and Waffa twelve. Ahmad said he had asked several N.G.O.s about getting a prosthesis for Fatma. He'd taped his phone number to the wall, in case someone showed up while he was out collecting metal.

Most civilians who were injured by U.S. artillery and air strikes were treated at the Raqqa Public Hospital. A former doctor from the hospital told me that by the end of the fighting only ten of his colleagues remained, the others having fled or died. Amputation became the default treatment for wounded limbs, the doctor said. One physician had performed so many amputations that ISIS accused him of deliberately impairing people. Infection and sepsis were common. Fatma said that, when she woke up in one of the wards, "they were cleaning my leg but I couldn't feel anything—then it started to smell and they cut it."

Because the hospital also treated ISIS militants, it was a frequent target of U.S. air strikes. (Toward the end of the offensive, it also became an ISIS fighting position.) When the current director of the hospital, Kassar Ali, took me inside the original facility, we had to scrabble through downed pipes and caved-in ceilings, the walls and floors scorched black by fire. Scattered everywhere were the remnants of medical supplies: white piles of cast plaster, contorted gurneys, smashed exam tables. Air strikes had destroyed all of the X-ray machines, CAT scanners, and MRI devices. Doctors Without Borders has financed the renovation of a new wing—which is currently the only public-health facility in Raqqa—but none of this essential equipment has been replaced. According to Ali, American commanders had visited the hospital on several occasions: "Each time, they took pictures, we had long meetings, and they promised support. But so far they've given us nothing." Since October, even the visits have stopped. Reached by phone recently, Ali said that he is deeply worried about the possibility of a COVID-19 outbreak in Raqqa. "We can take care of one or two patients, at most," he explained. The hospital has two ventilators—eight were lost to air strikes.

If people in Raqqa knew the U.S.'s rationale for refusing to engage in any substantive reconstruction of their city—because it might end up in the hands of the regime—they would no doubt feel even more betrayed than they do now. Raqqa is an Arab city, and most of its residents, unlike the Kurds, are unwilling to accept any deal with the regime. While interviewing people in Raqqa, I often heard the phrase "the devil before Assad." When General Mazloum made his accommodation with the regime, protests broke out in the city. Some Arabs, fearing the regime's return, have since fled. Hamad and Namat told me that if the regime comes back they, too, will leave. After they escaped Raqqa, in 2017, their daughter Noor married and moved to Hama Province, in western Syria; six months later, she was killed, along with her husband and her in-laws, in an air strike by the regime or the Russians. Hamad and Namat's anger aside, staying would be foolhardy: as natives of Aleppo, they risk meeting the same fate as the tens of thousands of Syrians whom the regime has disappeared since 2011. When their eldest son turned eighteen, he would be conscripted.

The partially demolished apartment where they now live once belonged to Namat's mother. When they returned to Raqqa, Hamad and Namat spent ten days clearing out rubble and shoring up the walls. Hamad wired in electricity, and Namat planted vegetables in an empty lot outside. They even had a kitchen with a sink and running water. If they left this place, I asked, where would they go? Hamad reflected, then said, "Wherever the regime isn't."

Dread of the regime is even more acute for those who have worked, even in limited capacities, with the U.S. At the offices of Citizenship House, a local N.G.O. based in the Al Firdous neighborhood, I met half a dozen women who ran democracy-education workshops funded by the State Department and by European governments. One of them, Yamam Abdulghani, told me, "To the regime, we're terrorists. They accuse us of applying a Western agenda and Western ideologies." When I asked what punishment such activities might elicit, Abdulghani said, "Look at Caesar's pictures." In 2013, a former military-police photographer using the pseudonym Caesar divulged thousands of images of Syrian prisoners who had been tortured and executed in regime detention centers.

The workshops at Citizenship House are quintessential "stabilization" programs. In contrast to humanitarian operations—which are supposed to address immediate needs—such programs are designed to forestall the emergence of ISIS and other extremist movements; for this reason, the U.S. and its allies will fund them. But, in Raqqa, the absence of any U.S. protection against the regime—and of any U.S. investment in rebuilding—has created exactly the kinds of conditions in which radical groups like ISIS flourish. According to Abdulghani, a bellwether for such instability in Raqqa is the current situation of its women.

Women's rights are central to the political philosophy of Abdullah Ocalan, and the S.D.F. and the Autonomous Administration vigorously promote gender equality. A billboard outside the Raqqa Civil Council declares, "With women at the forefront of the twenty-first century, we will end all violence against humanity." Moreover, before ISIS, few women in Raqqa wore niqabs and veils. Yet Abdulghani was one of only two uncovered women I met in the city. The other was the Kurdish co-chair of the Civil Council. Abdulghani said that the prevalence of niqabs and veils could be attributed, in part, to the lingering influence of ISIS. But the U.S. withdrawal was a bigger factor. "Before October, some women had started to uncover," she said. "Now it's stopped. Women are afraid of what's coming."

Abdulghani, who, in 2016, smuggled

herself out of Raqqa in a truckful of goats, said that people often harass her on the street, calling her a prostitute and warning that ISIS will soon be back. "Everyone is preparing to leave," she said. "No one feels secure. No one can think about tomorrow."

Two weeks after Trump ordered a full withdrawal of the thousand or so U.S. troops in Syria, he decided to send half of them back. They would not be defending their Kurdish allies against Turkey, or deterring the regime from encroaching on Raqqa. Instead, Trump said, "we are leaving soldiers to secure the oil." Cryptically, he went on, "Maybe somebody else wants the oil, in which case they'll have a hell of a fight." The Pentagon has characterized the mission differently: the "somebody" it is concerned about is ISIS, and American troops are in Syria "for the oil" only insofar as safeguarding it deprives ISIS of a potential source of revenue.

Both of these explanations feel disingenuous. It's true that ISIS persists around the S.D.F.-controlled oil fields of Deir Ezzour Province, where U.S. Special Forces continue to carry out counterterrorism raids. But Iran, which supports the Assad regime, is also active there. Nashat Khairi and his family, for instance, can't return to their village in Deir Ezzour because it is occupied by an Iranian-backed militia. Until October, containing Iranian adventurism was a key U.S. priority in Syria, and Trump's "maximum pressure" approach to Iran has been perhaps the most consistent feature of his foreign-policy agenda. Iranian operations in Syria are overseen by the Quds Force, which used to be commanded by Qassem Suleimani, the general who was assassinated in a drone strike in January. Trump later defended his decision to order the strike by saying that Suleimani had "viciously wounded and murdered thousands of U.S. troops." A U.S. withdrawal from Deir Ezzour could entail surrendering U.S. bases to the Quds Force.

IF THEY WERE CATS
LASSIE
YOUR IDIOT SON IS IN THE WELL AGAIN. YOU OUGHT TO FEED ME.
RIN TIN TIN
GENTLEMEN, I BELIEVE IT'S TIME WE REVISITED MY CONTRACT.
TOTO
I LIIIIKE YOU.
OLD YELLER
JUST A LITTLE CLOSER, TRAVIS... JUST A LITTLE CLOSER...
e. Flake

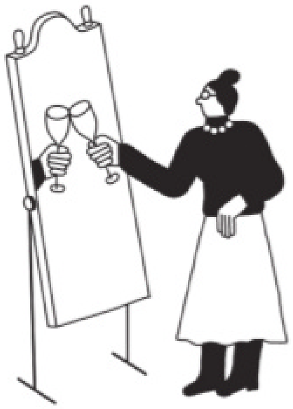
Another place in Syria where U.S. troops are currently stationed is also rich in oil—a Kurdish region called Jazira. But ISIS has no presence in Jazira, and there is little need to protect its oil. Most of the crude in both Jazira and Deir Ezzour is exported to the regime, which refines it and sells a portion back to the Kurds, as diesel and petroleum. Although the Kurds and the regime fundamentally oppose each other, they engage in this commerce because neither could subsist without it: international sanctions prevent the regime from buying sufficient oil on the global market, and the Kurds have no refineries of their own. Jazira is strategically valuable not because of its peculiar oil trade but because it is where the M4 crosses into northern Iraq—another Kurdish-governed territory. The border is a lifeline for Syrian Kurds, and also a bridge between two major spheres of U.S. influence. Russia is thus determined to control it. When I visited Jazira, this winter, U.S. and Russian patrols were confronting one another almost daily on the muddy roads that crisscross its barren hills.

Russia has long presented itself as a preferable alternative to U.S. hegemony in the Middle East, and Trump's disengagement has galvanized Putin's regional ambitions. The most arresting thing about the video showing the Russian takeover of the U.S. airbase near Ain Issa is not the Russian helicopter touching down on an American landing zone, or the Russian soldiers moving into American barracks; it is the Russian officer invoking timeworn American rhetoric. "We are here to deliver humanitarian and medical aid to civilians, and to provide them with peace and security," he says.

The Kurds know that Russia, Iran, and the regime want the same thing Turkey wants: an end to their autonomy in Syria. This is why many Kurds, despite Trump's oft-expressed indifference to their welfare, cling to the hope of a renewed alliance with the U.S. Nearly all the Kurdish officials I interviewed were so desperate to salvage what remained of the American commitment to Syria that they refused to speak on the record about the withdrawal. One S.D.F. commander told me that, even during the Turkish invasion, he and his peers refrained from criticizing the U.S. in the press. "We discussed it, and decided to say we felt 'disappointed' instead of 'betrayed,'" he said. Trump's opinion of the Kurds, however, seems to have only deteriorated since he abandoned them. In November, he hosted Erdoğan in the Oval Office, where the Turkish President reportedly produced an iPad and showed a video comparing General Mazloum to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the founder of ISIS. Afterward, Trump thanked Erdoğan and the Turkish military "for the job they've done" in Syria. He has also mused, "The Kurds, it's very interesting—Turkey doesn't like them, other people do."

Were Trump to remove the remaining U.S. forces in Jazira and Deir Ezzour, the S.D.F. would have to make additional concessions to the regime in order to secure a bulwark against Turkey. This could include handing over Raqqa. But, even if the U.S. stays in Syria, and Turkey does not renew its offensive, the status quo appears unsustainable. Once Russia, Iran, and the regime have defeated the final pockets of the Arab opposition, they will almost certainly turn their attention to the Kurds. Arthur Quesnay, a political scientist at the Sorbonne, who recently co-authored a report on northern Syria, told me, "It may take a couple of years, but the regime will gradually return and recapture territory." Quesnay believes that the fall of Raqqa and Deir Ezzour will be only the beginning. If the regime managed to take control of a few strategic sites, such as the border crossing in Jazira, it could starve the S.D.F. of resources, precipitating its collapse. In that case, Mazloum's army would revert to what it was before his fateful introduction to the U.S., in 2014: a small Kurdish militia, surrounded by enemies.

All over northern Syria, the Kurds are preparing for this scenario by building an extensive network of tunnels. According to Mazloum, Trump promised him that he would never allow Erdoğan to attack Kobani. But Mazloum seems to have little confidence in the reassurance: I saw more tunnels in his home town than anywhere else. Twenty-five miles of paved road connects the former U.S. airbase near Ain Issa to Kobani, which abuts the Turkish border. The entire length of this route is lined with small blue tents, spaced around seventy feet apart, each standing beside a large mound of soil. When my translator and I pulled over and entered one of them, we found two teen-agers, covered in dirt, peering into a narrow shaft. A winch was suspended above the mouth of the shaft, and when the boys retracted its cable a man in a harness surfaced from the subterranean dark. They had been digging for three weeks straight. The tunnel, which parallels the road, was thirty feet underground.



While the Kurds are adjusting to the fact that the sky is no longer on their side, so are the area's civilians. West of Ain Issa on the M4, where the front line with the Turks cuts across sweeping plains, a small Christian village called Tell Tawil sits on a low rise, conspicuous from a distance because of its abundant trees. In 2015, as ISIS neared Tell Tawil, the entire population fled. A year later, after the S.D.F. expelled ISIS, some people returned. When the Turks invaded, there was another exodus. One afternoon, as I accompanied an S.D.F. fighter through Tell Tawil's deserted streets, he explained that Turkish-backed militias across the fields frequently shelled the village, despite the ceasefire, and Turkish drones sometimes targeted it with missiles. All the houses were empty, and the church was boarded up.

I was therefore surprised when we came upon two old men, sitting shoulder to shoulder, on a stoop in the sun. Their names were David Abraham and Khoshaba Samuel. Abraham, who is eighty-seven years old, wore a pin-striped blazer over a V-neck sweater and a collared shirt. He said that he had lived in Tell Tawil since 1935. His wife had died six years ago, four of his five sons had settled in Sweden, and his daughter lived in the U.S. Samuel, who is eighty, had known Abraham since he was a child and still appeared to respect his seniority. "I love this land," Abraham said. "I'll never leave it." Samuel nodded in agreement.

After saying goodbye to Abraham and Samuel, I asked the S.D.F. fighter to show me his unit's forwardmost position. We were heading down a hill to the northern edge of the village when I heard footsteps approaching from behind and turned to see Abraham briskly following us. At the end of the road, the S.D.F. fighter pointed to several sandbagged foxholes outside a gated property. He gestured toward the open expanse, strewn with old tractor parts, that stretched from where we stood: this was the no man's land.

When Abraham caught up to us, he insisted that we come to his house for a cup of coffee. I asked where he lived.

"Here," he said, opening the gate behind the foxholes.

Three huge dogs barked and jumped on Abraham as he led us into the yard. Pushing them away, Abraham complained to the S.D.F. fighter that someone had recently shot one of the dogs in the paw. We sat at a picnic table, on a deck looking out toward the Turkish front line. Abraham said that mortars sometimes whistled over his roof. He went inside and returned with whiskey tumblers containing espresso. Roosters crowed. After a while, Samuel appeared and, without a word, took a seat across from Abraham. Like almost everyone else from Tell Tawil, they were cotton farmers. Abraham owned a six-acre parcel across the road, but, even if peace came to Syria before he died, he knew that he'd never work it again. ISIS, the Turks, and the S.D.F. had all littered it with mines.

As we stood to leave, I asked Abraham what Tell Tawil had been like during the Second World War, when Britain and Vichy France fought for control of Syria. He said that his memories were vague. One, however, did stand out. He remembered lying flat in the fields, with other children, each time planes passed overhead. ♦

PROFILES

YOU GOT IT!

The reassurance of Brittany Howard.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

Before Brittany Howard was paid to make music, she bagged groceries at a Kroger, sold used cars, made pizzas at a Domino's, fried eggs at a Cracker Barrel, built custom picture frames, sucked up trash for a commercial sanitation company, and delivered the U.S. mail along a rural route in northern Alabama, where she lived. She practiced with her rock band, Alabama Shakes, whenever she could. "I would work thirteen hours at the post office, get off, and rush to rehearsal," she told me.

In 2012, Alabama Shakes released their début album, "Boys & Girls." Howard was twenty-three, and had never travelled outside the South. Critics scrambled to praise the record; it briefly seemed as if Howard, whose voice is both burly and tender, a mixture of Robert Plant and Marvin Gaye, might be able to single-handedly resuscitate American rock and roll. "Boys & Girls," which was loose, open, and craggy, felt momentous and aberrant. At the time, a good portion of the rock music played on the radio—Imagine Dragons, Linkin Park—was so densely and fastidiously produced, so airless and unrelenting, that listening to it felt like getting whopped in the face with a snowball. "Boys & Girls" suggested a different way forward: it was not without potency, but it drifted in like a salty breeze.

The album eventually sold more than a million copies in the United States. Howard spent several years on tour with the band, an experience that she described as joyful and disorienting. "Right place, right time, and now all of a sudden I'm in England—I'm eating haggis!" she told me. "All of a sudden, I'm in France—I'm eating a snail!" Howard is a proud Southerner, yet she was eager to see the rest of the world. "In the deepest core of me, when I go to my happy place, there are cicadas in the background, the air is humid, I smell barbecue, and there's a train nearby," she said. "But I'd never seen a mountain before. I remember seeing the desert for the first time, the West Coast, the ocean. I was so excited about everything."

Soon, Howard had attracted some very famous fans, including Paul McCartney and Barack and Michelle Obama. "Hold On," the album's first single, was nominated for three Grammy Awards and named the best song of the year by *Rolling Stone*. The track gestures to the band's Southern lineage—there are echoes of Duane Allman and Wilson Pickett ripping on "Hey Jude" at FAME Studios, in Muscle Shoals, and a bit of Rufus and Carla Thomas singing "I Didn't Believe" at Satellite Records, in Memphis. In the pre-chorus, Howard addresses herself: "Come on, Brittany/You got to get back up!" she bellows. It's a small choice, using her name like that, but it disarms me every time I hear it. When Howard finally delivers the full chorus—"Yeah, you got to hold on!"—she's singing with so much vigor and boldness that the lyric feels less like a plea than like a nonnegotiable demand.

Howard wrote "Hold On" while she was working for the sanitation company. "I was in this little fucking truck, going to my job cleaning commercial properties," she said. "We made CDs of our practices, and I put a CD in, and just started singing the hook: 'Hold on.'" The band had a gig booked at the Brick Deli & Tavern, a sports bar in Decatur, Alabama. Howard improvised the rest of the song onstage. When she arrived at the chorus, the crowd began singing along as if they had heard it before, as if it were a cover, as if they had known it all their lives.

Howard, who is now thirty-one, splits her time between Nashville, where she moved shortly after the success of "Boys & Girls," and Taos, New Mexico. She's considering yet another relocation, possibly to the West Coast. She requires a certain amount of agitation to feel inspired. "Once I start getting comfortable, I get *too* comfortable. I like things to change," she said. "I like things to move."

"Sound & Color," Alabama Shakes' second record, from 2015, débuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* 200 and was nominated for six Grammys, including Album of the Year. That year, the British pop singer Adele told the *Guardian* that she was "obsessed" with Howard: "She's so fucking full of soul, overflowing, dripping, that I almost can't handle it." Prince invited the Shakes to play at Paisley Park, and asked if he could join them onstage for a song. "It comes time to do 'Give Me All Your Love,' and I'm getting worried, because I don't see this dude," Howard recalled. "I step back from the mike, and then out of nowhere he just pops onstage, people *lose* their minds, and he starts shredding. *Shredding*. So I was, like, 'I'm gonna double-shred with you. When else am I gonna get to do this?' Now we're double-soloing, and it's as sick as it sounds. It's happening, it's psychedelic, it's amazing. And then he gives me a little kiss on the cheek, leaps like a baby fawn over all the amplifiers into the darkness, and I never saw him again."

When it came time for Alabama Shakes to produce a third album, the songs weren't coming. On a cross-country drive, Howard stared blankly out the window. "I was sitting there, silent, thinking to myself, What am I gonna do? What do I want?" she told me. The safe choice—sticking around Nashville and grinding it out with the band—didn't feel right. "I'd rather make a few mistakes and still be myself than be rich and bored," she said.

In 2017, Howard left Alabama Shakes to make a solo album. "Everyone was, like, 'No, don't do that! You

Howard taught herself to play the guitar when she was eleven: "I had no options, and I didn't care about anything else."

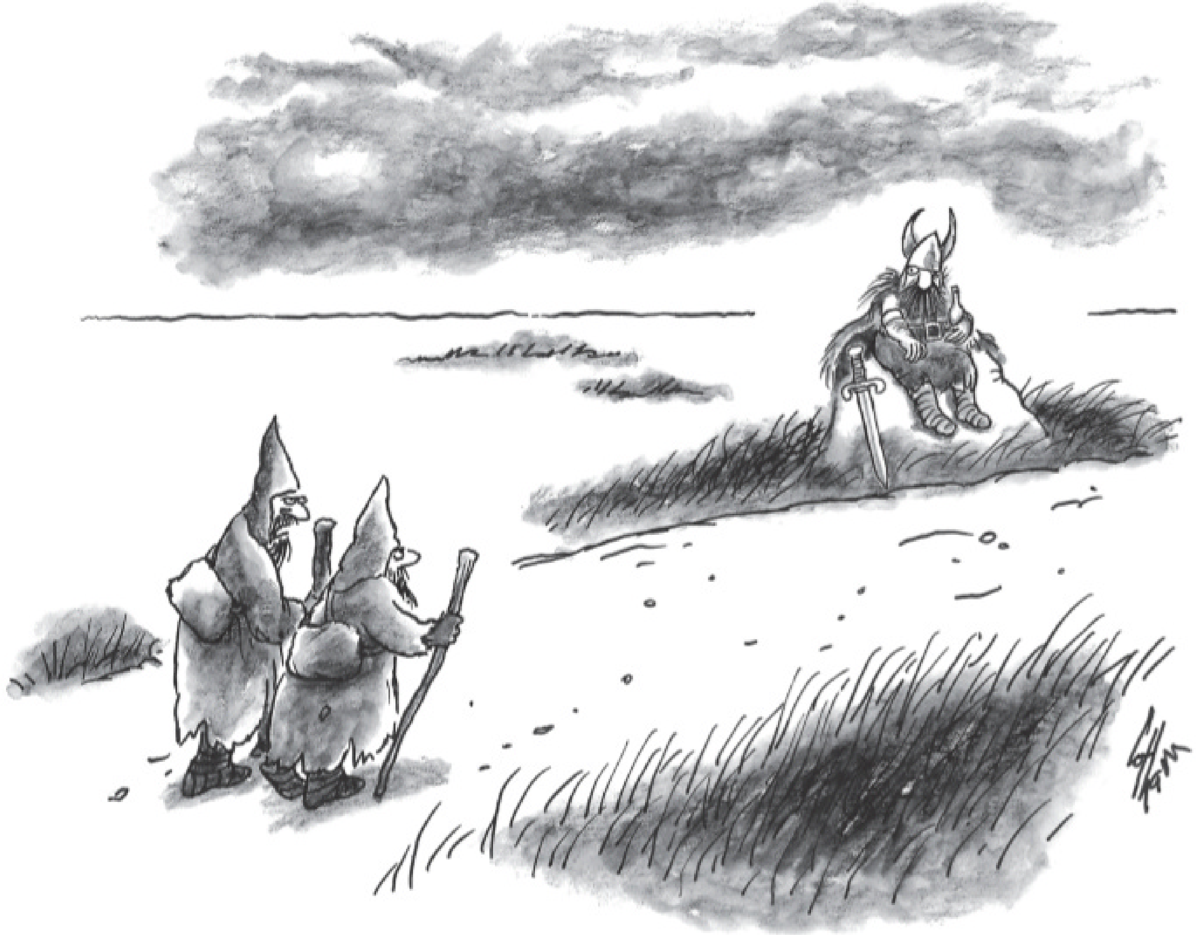
PHOTOGRAPH BY RUVEN AFANADOR

can do this on the side, but don't cancel the Shakes!'" she said. She cancelled the Shakes. It requires a particular kind of bravura to untether oneself from a band that, to the outside world, still appeared to be on the come-up.

"Jaime," her solo début, which came out last fall, does not resemble any album I can think of, though it does share some spiritual DNA with two of the boldest and most stylistically inscrutable releases of the past century: "Black Messiah," the third album by the R. & B. singer D'Angelo, and Sly and the Family Stone's "There's a Riot Goin' On," a psychedelic-rock masterpiece from 1977. "Jaime" is deep, freaky, and heartfelt. Nearly all its songs feature some sort of heavy groove, but Howard often complicates them by adding prickly guitar riffs at unusual intervals, folding in samples, or putting an effect on her voice that makes it sound tinny and distant, as if she's singing into the receiver of a rotary phone. "Jaime" is familiar enough that it's easy to like—it's the sort of record people will immediately ask about if you put it on during a party—but it is also intensely idiosyncratic, and does not hew to any genre constraints. At first, Howard wasn't entirely sure what she wanted "Jaime" to sound like. "I'd be, like, 'I think I want it to be like this?'" she said. "And then I'd hear some song and be, like, 'No, I definitely want it to be like *that*.' And then I'd hear another song, and it'd be: 'Well, maybe more like this!'" She went into the studio anyway. "The songs showed up," she said.

When Howard first has an idea, she likes to record directly to her laptop. "The fancier shit stops me from working fast, because I have to turn everything on," she said. "I'd say my first three ideas are usually the ones I throw out, because I'm *trying* to write." She wrote "Georgia," her favorite song on "Jaime," while eating a sandwich and reading an article about the experimental R. & B. musician Georgia Anne Muldrow: "The song's not *to* her, or *about* her, but I was, like, 'Man, I wish Georgia would work with me!' So I'm walking around the house going, 'I just want Georgia / To notice me.'" Howard realized that the line was actually a chorus, and choked the sandwich down. "I'm hearing everything so suddenly, the most important thing is time," she said.

Howard made part of "Jaime" at a rented house in Topanga Canyon, Los Angeles. This past January, she returned to L.A. "History Repeats," a single from the album, had been nominated for Grammys for Best Rock Performance and Best Rock Song, and at the ceremony Howard would be accompanying Alicia Keys, who was hosting, on guitar. Howard had rented a four-story glass-and-concrete house in Beverly Hills. One afternoon, she showed me around the place. The toilet in the master bathroom responded to voice commands. "Hello, toilet!" she yelled when we walked in. The lid rose expectantly. The house was built into the side of a cliff, and a steep stone path led through a bamboo grove to a koi pond and a small boathouse. A pair of plastic lounge chairs sat by the pool.



"I'm just saying it would be a mistake for you to mock this guy."

"When I'm in L.A., dude, I need a pool," Howard said. She lit a cigarette, and we cracked open the first of several million cans of White Claw, the flavored alcoholic seltzer. I'd never had one before. "I'm gonna tell you one thing about them," she said. Her voice grew serious. "They'll sneak up on your ass!"

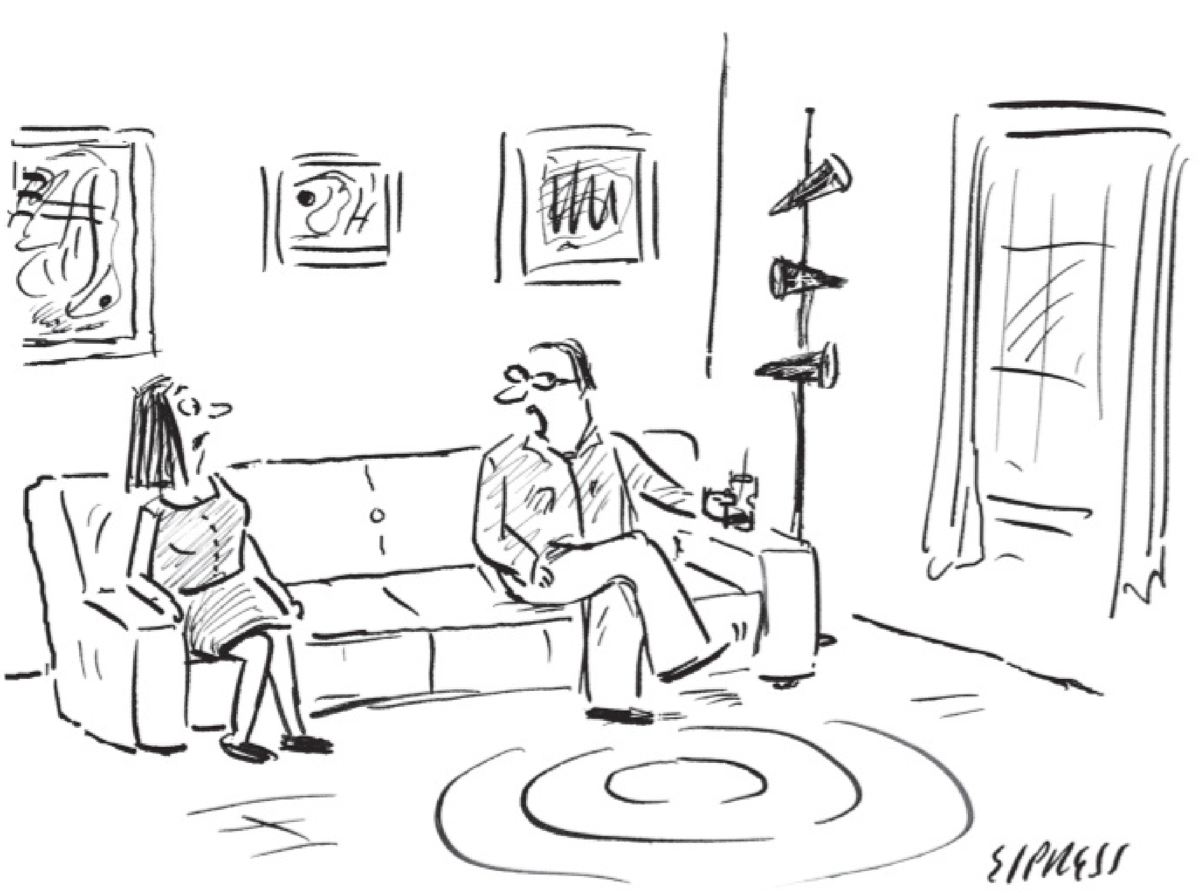
Howard was wearing black leggings, slip-on sandals, a green T-shirt, and a black plaid button-down. A gold Libra medallion hung on a long chain around her neck. Howard has several tattoos, including two thin black lines that extend from the outside corner of her left eye, toward her ear. Most celebrities claim a kind of radical transparency, but Howard actually appears to be constitutionally incapable of bullshit. She laughs heartily if anyone, including herself, says something dishonest. "I'm an open book," she told me, flicking ash into an empty White Claw can.

Howard was born on October 2, 1988, in Athens, Alabama, a city of some twenty-six thousand people, about halfway between Nashville and Birmingham. During the Civil War, Athens was briefly occupied by Union forces, and Colonel John Basil Turchin gave his troops tacit permission to ransack the area, telling them, "I shut my eyes for two hours, I see nothing." Less than a century later, Athens was the birthplace of Don Black, the founder of the neo-Nazi Web site Stormfront and a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Originally a cotton town, it became a railroad town. In 1974, the Tennessee Valley Authority opened the Browns Ferry Nuclear Power Plant, at the time one of the largest nuclear-power plants in the world, nearby. "I grew up swimming right behind a power plant, man," Howard said. "We all did."

Howard's parents—her father is black, and her mother is white—met in high school, in nearby Tanner. They got pregnant with Howard's older sister, Jaime, who was born in 1985, and married a few years later. As a kid, Howard had a hard time getting friends to come over. "One, my parents were an interracial couple," she explained. "Two, I lived in a junk yard." Howard's father took apart old cars for parts, and her family set up a trailer in the middle of the property. "My dad had to hustle his whole life," she said. "He was a black man, and he didn't really get to go to college. He's really charming, and good at talking to people, so he went into the car-sale business." She described her mother as "very pastoral. She grew up on a farm. So around our trailer was grass and animals. And then around that was . . . the junk yard."

Both Howard and Jaime were born with retinoblastoma, a rare form of cancer that can lead to blindness; Howard has only partial vision in her left eye. When Jaime was eleven, she became seriously ill. "She woke up one day, and she couldn't see," Howard said. "It was hospitals, until it got worse and worse and worse. Then it was hospice. Then it was over." Howard was eight when Jaime died. Her parents divorced soon afterward. "I got shipped around to a lot of family members, because my parents didn't want me to see what was going on," she said.

Howard was traumatized by her sister's death: "I would see people just being themselves, and think, What the fuck is *that* like? I'm over here panicking." To blunt her suffering, Howard ate. "In my household, especially on my father's side, everybody's overweight. I was getting away with it for a really long time," she said. "When I first started touring with the Shakes, we'd get off of tour and I'd binge eat. I remember waking up to a Hardee's bag, and being, like, 'Bro, enough is enough. This is not O.K.'"



"How should I know what I'm thinking? I'm not a mind reader."

She also unintentionally forswore intimacy. "Everyone on the outside was saying, 'You're a singer in a band, you're really gregarious, you're really charming,' but in my head, I was thinking, Nah, I'm a fat-wad. Nah, nobody wants to be with me." On the title track from "Sound & Color," Howard sings, "I want to touch a human being/I want to go back to sleep." Her voice sounds high and thin. Eventually, it splinters with longing.

Howard came out when she was in her twenties, following a period of serious self-interrogation. She hadn't encountered many openly gay people growing up. "When I lived in Athens, gay people looked a certain way, and I didn't look like them," she said. "Then, when I went to the city, I was, like, 'Oh! There's actually not a look.' And they were *happy*. The gay people where I was from were very sad and heartbroken." Howard told her parents about her sexuality a few years ago. At first, her mother wasn't sure what to make of it. "Then she realized, O.K., I have one daughter left, and I'm not gonna abandon her," Howard said. "My dad did not give one shit. He does not care at all."

A few years ago, Howard met the musician and writer Jesse Lafser through mutual friends in Nashville. They started playing together in a folk-rock band called Bermuda Triangle. "I went to the fucking doctor when I first met Jesse," Howard said, laughing. "My palms were sweaty, and my heart wouldn't stop beating really fast. I was panicking. My stomach was flipping. I thought I had diabetes. The doctor was, like, 'You're fine.' Then one of my friends was, like, 'You're in love!'" She and Lafser were married last year, outside Taos: "We were sitting in a restaurant we always go to, and I was, like, 'Oh, they do weddings! Should we get married right now?' So we got married on a mountain, next to a stream."

During the writing and the recording of "Jaime," Howard often responded to uncertainty and fear by praying to her sister. "I feel like, in a weird way, we did it together," she said. Though Howard is not religious, the idea of God is often present in her songs. On "13th Century Metal," her delivery evokes the hypnotic cadences of Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets, but the lyrics ("I promise to love my enemy/And never become that which is not God") are reminiscent of the fiery sermons recorded to 78-r.p.m. disks by itinerant black preachers in the nineteen-twenties. "I went into the studio, and I was, like, 'Put some echo on my voice. Make it sound really big,'" she said. She was thinking about the gravity and the erudition of Martin Luther King, Jr., a vibe that she described as "college campus." The original recording was eight minutes long. "The reason I call it '13th Century Metal' is because that's what it sounds like to me," she said. "The chords are very Gregorian, but it's also *metal*—it's got rage in it."

As the sun began to fade, Howard and I attempted to cajole Taylor Ann, Howard's friend and assistant, to send more White Claws down to the pool in the house's tiny elevator. Taylor Ann finally appeared in person and announced that we had drunk them all. We went inside, ordered Thai food, and sunk into a large white sectional. On the flat-screen television, Howard cued up a seemingly infinite compilation of YouTube videos showing people being walloped in the genitals. An A.T.V. cascaded into a gully, launching its driver heavenward. His crotch collided with the steering wheel. "Bro!" Howard screamed, and laughed.

Howard started singing when she was three years old. Her great-uncle played bluegrass, and he often invited musicians over to jam in his woodshop. "I came in there one night, and they handed me a microphone," Howard said. "I remember all these grown country men, laughing and being entertained and giving me so much attention. I loved it." Her great-uncle started leaving a guitar in her bedroom. When she was eleven, a rock band performed at the high-school gym, and she immediately knew how she wanted to spend the rest of her life. She began teaching herself how to play. "I had no options, and I didn't care about anything else," she said.

Howard met the bassist Zac Cockrell when they were both in high school. The guitarist Heath Fogg and the drummer Steve Johnson joined them in 2009. Fogg painted houses, Johnson worked at the power plant, Cockrell had a job at an animal clinic. "I couldn't afford college," Howard said. "I didn't get a loan. I was kind of put in a position where I had to, you know, hope for the best."

In 2011, Howard posted a song—"You Ain't Alone," a slow-burning R. & B. ballad—to ReverbNation, a social-networking site for independent musicians. Justin Gage, the founder of the music Web site Aquarium Drunkard, heard the song after a friend posted it on Facebook. In a short piece for the site, Gage described Alabama Shakes as "a slice of the real; an unhinged, and as of yet unsigned, blues-based soul outfit fronted by a woman armed with a whole lotta voice and a Gibson SG." Gage also played the track on his radio show. "It felt completely fresh and apart from the Zeitgeist of 2011," Gage told me recently. "It seemed inherently out of time—nothing calculated, no retro pastiche. It just was."

When Howard woke up the next morning, her in-box was packed with entreaties from managers and agents. The group didn't have much time to consider its next move. "We had to play this show in Florence, Alabama, at a record store," Howard said. Patterson Hood, the singer and guitarist in the Southern-rock band Drive-By Truckers, was in the crowd that night. "There were maybe twenty-five people there at most, and they were playing through a tiny vocal P.A. with no monitors," Hood remembered. "It was the most incredible show I'd seen in years. I was blown away."

Hood's managers, Christine Stauder and Kevin Morris, flew to Alabama the next morning. Howard woke up hungover. "I slept in a chair in this tiny-ass apartment," she recalled. Stauder and Morris asked to meet her at their hotel: "I get in my mail car, and I drive to the Marriott. I do not feel good, and I'm still in my pajamas, and I have a little do-rag on my head. I looked around, and I didn't see anybody that looked like they were from New York, so I went up to the bar and said, 'I'll have a beer please.' And then they walked up. I was drinking a beer at 11 A.M., like, 'Hey!'"

The band signed with Stauder and Morris and booked some dates opening for the Drive-By Truckers. Howard recalled Morris calling her at the post office a few weeks later, explaining that she could leave her job soon. "I was, like, 'Word? Can I get some money so I can quit right now?'" She smiled. "I'm elated just remembering how good it felt."

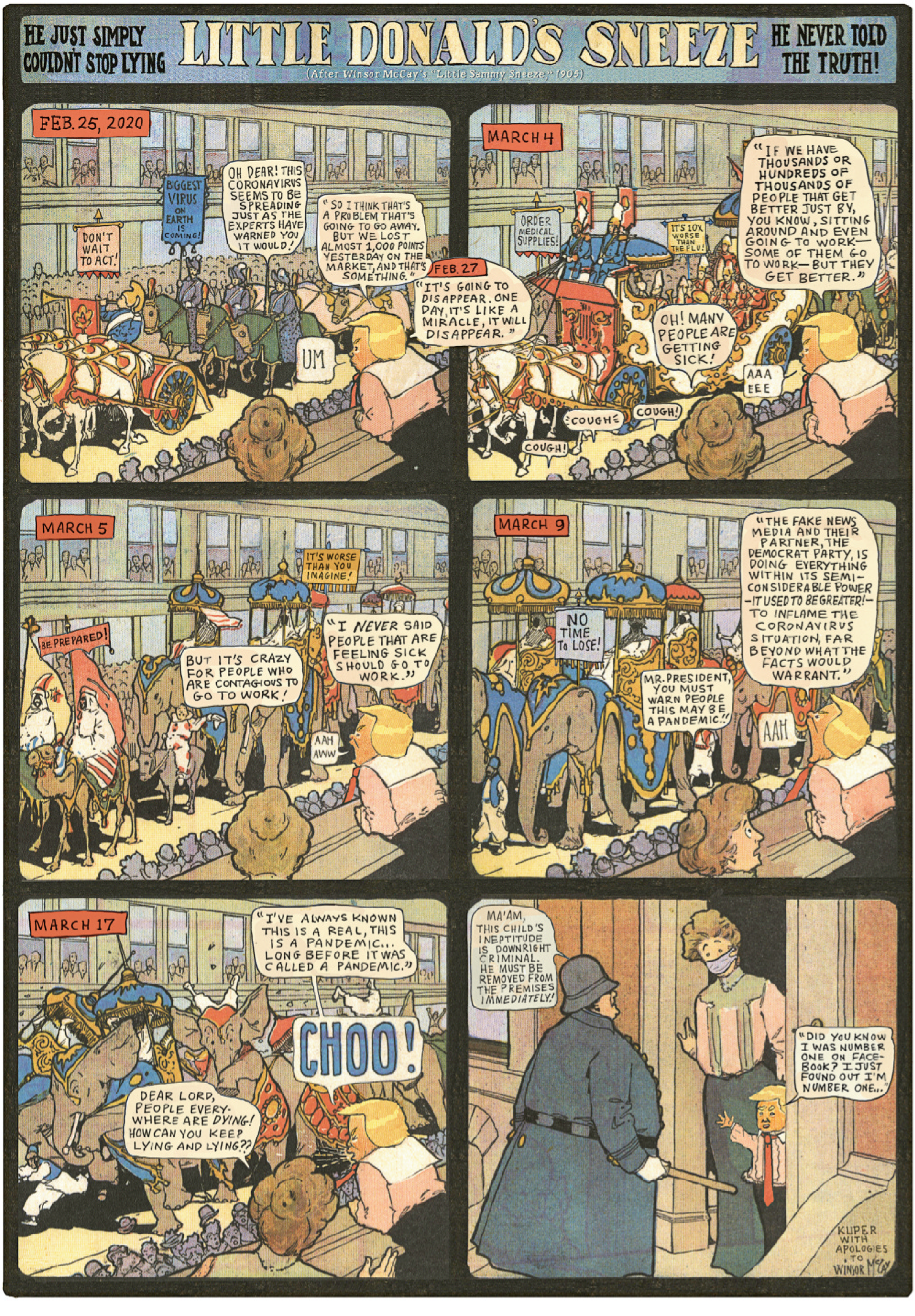
Howard and I made plans to meet in Nashville in late February. When she picked me up, in a silver Audi S.U.V., heavy rain was pelting the city. "I've been watching the Doppler radar like an old lady," she said. Ray Charles was playing on the stereo. A small photo of her and Jaime in Halloween costumes—she was dressed as the Devil, and Jaime was dressed as a clown—swung on a bronze chain dangling from her rearview mirror. We drove south, toward Athens.

Shortly after we crossed the Tennessee-Alabama border, a roadside attraction came into view: a three-hundred-and-sixty-foot-tall replica of the Saturn V, a space rocket developed at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center, in Huntsville, and used in the Apollo program in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Howard pulled over so that I could take a picture of it. "I've done this drive so many times, I don't even notice it anymore," she said, while I crouched in the wet grass, trying to fit the whole thing in the frame.

"My little home town!" Howard said, when we finally pulled into Athens. We cruised past cotton fields, Dollar General stores, and at least a dozen one-room Baptist churches. The landscape is flat and, in winter, incredibly wet. Howard showed me the ponds where she fished for bream, and the spot on the Tennessee River where she and her friends would stand around drinking beer. We drove by the power plant. We drove by her mother's house. We drove through downtown, past City Hall, where, in 2007, the Ku Klux Klan held an anti-immigration rally. Howard was nineteen. "Here's the thing," she said. "Everybody showed up to get 'em out of town—*everybody* did."

Howard took me to a squat gray house beside the railroad tracks, built by her great-grandfather in the nineteen-forties. Her family eventually sold it, but when she was in her late teens the new owners let some of her relatives move in. "We didn't have to pay rent, because it was so dilapidated," she told me. "But I did have to cut the grass. So I would cut the grass, and then I got to

COMIC STRIP (AFTER WINSOR McCAY) BY PETER KUPER


HE JUST SIMPLY COULDN'T STOP LYING
LITTLE DONALD'S SNEEZE
HE NEVER TOLD THE TRUTH!
(After Winsor McCay's "Little Sammy Sneeze," 1905)
FEB. 25, 2020
DON'T WAIT TO ACT!
BIGGEST VIRUS ON EARTH IS COMING!
OH DEAR! THIS CORONAVIRUS SEEMS TO BE SPREADING JUST AS THE EXPERTS HAVE WARNED YOU IT WOULD!
"SO I THINK THAT'S A PROBLEM THAT'S GOING TO GO AWAY. BUT WE LOST ALMOST 1,000 POINTS YESTERDAY ON THE MARKET, AND THAT'S SOMETHING."
UM
FEB. 27
"IT'S GOING TO DISAPPEAR. ONE DAY, IT'S LIKE A MIRACLE, IT WILL DISAPPEAR."
MARCH 4
ORDER MEDICAL SUPPLIES!
IT'S 10X WORSE THAN THE FLU!
"IF WE HAVE THOUSANDS OR HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE THAT GET BETTER JUST BY, YOU KNOW, SITTING AROUND AND EVEN GOING TO WORK—SOME OF THEM GO TO WORK—BUT THEY GET BETTER."
OH! MANY PEOPLE ARE GETTING SICK!
AAA EEE
COUGH
COUGH!
COUGH!
MARCH 5
IT'S WORSE THAN YOU IMAGINE!
BE PREPARED!
BUT IT'S CRAZY FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE CONTAGIOUS TO GO TO WORK!
"I NEVER SAID PEOPLE THAT ARE FEELING SICK SHOULD GO TO WORK."
AAH AWW
MARCH 9
NO TIME TO LOSE!
MR. PRESIDENT, YOU MUST WARN PEOPLE THIS MAY BE A PANDEMIC!
"THE FAKE NEWS MEDIA AND THEIR PARTNER, THE DEMOCRAT PARTY, IS DOING EVERYTHING WITHIN ITS SEMI-CONSIDERABLE POWER —IT USED TO BE GREATER!— TO INFLAME THE CORONAVIRUS SITUATION, FAR BEYOND WHAT THE FACTS WOULD WARRANT."
AAH
MARCH 17
"I'VE ALWAYS KNOWN THIS IS A REAL, THIS IS A PANDEMIC... LONG BEFORE IT WAS CALLED A PANDEMIC."
CHOO!
DEAR LORD, PEOPLE EVERYWHERE ARE DYING! HOW CAN YOU KEEP LYING AND LYING??
MA'AM, THIS CHILD'S INEPTITUDE IS DOWNRIGHT CRIMINAL. HE MUST BE REMOVED FROM THE PREMISES IMMEDIATELY!
"DID YOU KNOW I WAS NUMBER ONE ON FACEBOOK? I JUST FOUND OUT I'M NUMBER ONE..."
KUPER WITH APOLOGIES TO WINSOR McCAY

I SEE YOU TOUCHING YOUR FACE IN THERE!
NE

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live in this cold-ass, fucked-up house."

We parked and walked the perimeter. "This used to be surrounded by pecan trees," Howard said. She pointed to Whitt's, a little barbecue shack next door: "I'd be so hungry, just looking at the place, smelling the barbecue, and they'd look at us and give me a sandwich for free." Sometimes, when she couldn't pay the electric bill, she ran an extension cord from Whitt's to their living room. Adjusting to a life with money has been a strange experience for Howard. "I still don't act right," she said. "This car is the first new car I've ever bought in my life." She added, "I'm not frugal, but, if I don't need it, I don't need it. Gucci this, Gucci that—I don't buy that stuff."

Howard eventually moved out of the house by the railroad tracks, in part because she could no longer tolerate its ghosts. "Oh, yeah, that bitch haunted as hell!" she said. She recounted being locked out of the house, cabinets opening and shutting on their own, doors slamming, and curtains moving. "It was fucking terrifying," she said. "I always had this sensation that somebody was watching me. I ran out of explanations after a while."

We drove past a cemetery ("Hell, yeah! Thinkin' about death everyday!" she said, laughing), and down a long wooded road toward the modest house that she bought after the Shakes took off—a brick split-level with "a big-ass basement." (She sold it a few years ago.) We made a quick stop at J&G, a kind of general store that sells fake flowers, tools, strange knickknacks, and decorative signs ("WHAT HAPPENS ON THE PATIO STAYS ON THE PATIO"). Inside, we paused in front of a display of miniature flags. "I'm proud of them for not having any Confederate flags," she said. "I appreciate that." We strolled the aisles. Howard got a replica of a bream—"We call 'em shellcracker," she said—and a plastic banana. The woman at the register looked slightly dazed as Howard approached. "I didn't realize a celebrity had come in!" she exclaimed.

Howard wanted to show me a neighborhood known as Batts Heights. "This whole subdivision is a black subdivision," she said. Her grandmother and some cousins still live there. She stopped at a rusted trash can, which had the words "BATTS HEIGHTS SUB. HELP KEEP THE COMMUNITY CLEAN!" hand-painted on it in yellow: "You know how some people got the big brick signs that say, like, 'WELCOME TO RAM'S GATE'? We've got that trash can! That's probably the third or fourth trash can. People keep wrecking into 'em."

When Howard was young, her parents often dropped her off there to play with her cousins. The kids were periodically terrorized by a stray dog they referred to as Doody Booty. Sometimes they made cassette recordings on old boom boxes. "We'd do gangsta rap and 'your mama' jokes," Howard recalled. "They were brutal." But she described the experience with gratitude. "At the end of the day, I'm really close to this side of my family," she said. "They accepted everybody for who they were. If you're an alcoholic crackhead, you're invited to dinner, too!"

Athens was a difficult place to be queer, mixed race, and, after her sister's death, in mourning. She recalled visiting an amusement park with some of her mother's relatives and having the gate to a ride closed before she could pass through—it hadn't occurred to the attendant that she might be part of a group of white people. Once, someone slashed the tires of her father's car and threw a bloodied goat head in the back. She didn't learn about the incident until she was fourteen, when her mother told her about it. "I just couldn't believe someone would slaughter a goat because they hated someone so much," Howard said. On "Goat Head," she sings:

I guess I'm not supposed to mind, 'cause
I'm brown, I'm not black
But who said that?
See, I'm black, I'm not white
But I'm that, nah, nah, I'm this, right?
I'm one drop of three-fifths, right?

In the late afternoon, we met Howard's father, K.J., and her cousin Promise at Old Greenbrier Restaurant, a cinder-block barbecue joint on the outskirts of town. The menu was divided between Meals from the Pond (catfish) and Meals from the Barnyard (chicken, pork, hamburger steak). A waitress brought several baskets of hush puppies and a bottle of white sauce. "We always did music," Promise said. "Brittany played drums, guitars. She'd play the piano, and we sounded like a *band*."

"They'd sing," K.J. added, grinning. "I remember Brittany went to the kitchen, she got a big pot, a little pot, another little pot, she got a big spoon and"—he made a series of drumming sounds—"Brittany! Put them pots up!"

"We loved some music," Howard said, laughing. "It was free!"

After supper, we followed K.J. back to the junk yard. He drives a black pickup truck with a license plate that reads "SHAKES." We crossed a little wooden bridge over a small creek. One time, Howard got stranded there during a tornado, when the engine on her old Bronco stalled. K.J. and his girlfriend were with her, and Howard had to carry the woman to the other side. K.J. fell in the creek and, for a brief moment, Howard thought he was going to die. "I swear to God, the most guttural 'Daddy!' came out of me, from the depths of my spirit," she recalled. "I thought he was, like, gone, because I don't know if my dad can swim that well. Somehow, he stood back up in those floodwaters, and he just kept going."

The junk yard hadn't changed much since Howard lived there. Cars in varying states of disrepair were stacked willy-nilly. Her father's dog had recently given birth to a litter of puppies, and they whimpered softly from under the house. Inside, K.J. had built a shrine to his daughter: four Grammys, some gold records, a framed photograph of her with the Obamas, taken after she performed at the White House, in 2013. K.J. has accompanied his daughter to the Grammys several times. This year, he sat next to Cardi B. "I told her she was the shit!" he said. "She wasn't friendly." He had placed the floppy leather hat Howard wore in her first photo shoot—a portrait made by Autumn de Wilde, in the woods outside the junk yard—on a mannequin's head.

On the way back to Nashville, we drove past the cemetery where Jaime is buried. "I'll never forget this interview with Roger Waters, where he said he asked his mother, 'When does my life begin?' And she was, like, 'Anytime you want it to.' That always stuck with me," Howard said. "I was always trying to figure out what the lady meant. What do you mean, anytime you want it to?" She paused. "I feel like this part of my life is my Part Two. There was Part One, and now there's this."

One night in January, Howard was appearing at the Palladium, a theatre in Hollywood. As we inched down Sunset Boulevard in the back of an S.U.V., she played air drums to Meg Myers's cover of Kate Bush's "Running Up That Hill," a fierce and propulsive song about the limits of empathy. Howard is all empathy on some level, but she also believes strongly in accountability, particularly when it comes to relationships. I asked her if she leaned on Lafser for support when she returned from a tour. "To be honest, it's not my partner's responsibility," she said. "It's my responsibility to take care of myself before I come home."

Backstage, Taylor Ann brewed a pot of hot tea with lemon, fresh ginger, and manuka honey. Members of Howard's band, which includes Cockrell on bass, began to arrive. During the sound check, they rehearsed a cover of Funkadelic's "You and Your Folks, Me and My Folks." Even when reading lyrics off her phone, Howard is a transfixing vocalist; she knows how to compress and extend a note in a way that feels as if she's squeezing all the juice from a piece of very ripe fruit.

Howard gets nervous before a show only if her parents are in the audience. Her performance style has evolved over the years. "When I was younger, it was coming from a place of *needing* to get everything out," she said. "Now it comes from a place of being a powerful person." Early on, Alabama Shakes had a sort of populist charm—they wore normal clothes and had normal haircuts, and seemed as if they could have come from any high school in any small town. Onstage, Howard was sometimes sheepish. Now she is poised and deliberate, with an almost balletic confidence.

The theatre's V.I.P. balcony filled up quickly: Slash, from Guns N' Roses; the rapper Tyler, the Creator; the rock photographer Danny Clinch. The musician and actor Donald Glover, who records as Childish Gambino, wore a yellow knit beanie and a mustache, and stood alone, crooning along to the chorus of "Stay High," a single from "Jaime."

"Brittany is an alien," Tyler, the Creator, told me later. "Everything about her—from her music to her background to her energy in person—it's so unique. She's paving concrete for so many people, and I'm not sure she's even aware of it." He's especially enamored of "Baby," a spare, stretchy song about betrayal. "It makes my chest hurt it's so good," he said. Howard was in black pants, a black shirt, gold earrings, eyeglasses, and a long gold jacket. For her encore, she returned to the stage with just her drummer and keyboardist to play "Run to Me," the final song on "Jaime." "I wrote this for myself," she said. "To say, 'Hey, you got it.'"

That sentiment feels true of most of Howard's songs, which are either reassurances (I've got it) or implorations (Please believe that I've got it, and that you've got it, too). The chorus of "Run to Me" is mostly the latter: Howard is asking someone to let her love them. She could be singing to herself—it's hard to say for sure.

Many of the most beloved performers try to put as little distance as possible between themselves and their audience. With Howard, this kind of intimacy seems instinctive, in part because she is inherently unpretentious, and in part because she has spent so much time figuring out how to live without shame. "A lot of people do shit because they don't know themselves," she had told me earlier. "If you can just kind of be *you*, you're gonna be all right." Onstage, her brow was damp. She leaned into the final verse:

> Run, run, run, run, run to me
> Oh, run to me
> And I will be your partner
> When you can't stand it anymore. ♦

bedtime story | sarah shun-lien bynum

PHOTOGRAPH BY JANNA IRELAND

One long winter night, Ezra Washington's wife walks in on him telling their younger child stories from his rollerblading days. The room is as dark as a coal mine and his voice floats sonorously from somewhere in the vicinity of the trundle bed. He is remembering a time long before the child was born, a time when he was a poor graduate student living in New York City with nothing but his own body and mind for entertainment. Saturdays were spent in the narrow park that runs alongside the Hudson River, blading up and down the path very fast, as if his happiness depended on it.

"She was coming straight at me," he says. "To the right of me was the river. And to the left a pack of bicyclists. She was coming around the bend with a look of panic in her eyes."

From the doorway his wife wonders silently if he is speaking about her, the younger self who, on the three or four occasions on which she'd joined him, may have worn this expression.

"She was going fast, too?" their child asks in the dark.

"No, not at all, she was clearly a beginner. Which made the situation that much more dangerous," Ezra says patiently. He then explains how he called out to her in the instant before they collided. "*I've got you!*" he cried to the inexperienced skater as he grasped her by the forearms and guided her down between his legs until her bottom gently touched the ground. "By then she was laughing," he said. "That laugh you'd know anywhere."

His wife doesn't recall ever laughing while on Rollerblades. Her first wild thought is that all these years she's been wrong about herself. But then the child shifts in his bed and sets the comforter to rustling and casts the story in an entirely new light. "She's the one who plays the mom?" he asks. "With the big teeth and the long brown hair?"

"Well, I'd say it's more of a reddish brown. An auburn color. But yes, that's right," Ezra says to the child. "Julia Roberts."

"Julia Roberts went right between your legs," the child confirms.

"Yes, but don't repeat that," Ezra says. "Better to say we crashed into each other. Or that Julia Roberts crashed into me."

The child falls silent, as if committing this to memory.

Ezra adds, "It's not an exaggeration to say she was the biggest movie star in the world."

"Back then," the child clarifies.

Fine, his mother thinks, *back then*—all children are by nature sticklers—but in fact the poor kid has no idea. Never will he know the stunned sensation of emerging from the darkness of a matinée on Senior Skip Day, speechless at what they'd just seen: Julia Roberts as an adorable streetwalker. It confounded the imagination. Whatever had possessed them to spend their day of mutiny in this ridiculous way? They would never forget it. A whole group of them milling about on the sidewalk outside the theatre, boarding-school students let loose on the world and now at a loss for what to do next, Ezra with his arm resting lightly across the shoulders of his girlfriend, Christina, his serious senior-year girlfriend Christina, and Christina looking shy and triumphant because already more than one person had said, "You know, you kind of look like her. . . ."

Yes, she was there that day, witness to the spectacle of Ezra and Christina, and though she was sandwiched in the middle of the crowd, she saw them as if from a great distance, from a far, chilly point on the periphery. She kept half an eye on Ezra from long habit. She had done so, without quite wanting to, through all the weeks and months of high school that had come before, and maybe he had noticed: when he and Christina broke up, after a run of graduation parties, it was she whom he called. He was miserable but talkative. You still had to pay for long distance in those days. On a Saturday morning in early October, he appeared on the steps of her freshman dorm, despite having enrolled at a college more than three hours away. By the time Ezra got into graduate school, they were an old couple, a familiar sight. She, too, had her tales of New York. The park he spoke of, and its hazardous paths—she once knew them well.

"Tell him," Ezra urges, his voice turned in her direction. It comes as a surprise: she thought she had gone unnoticed when she glided into the room, wearing socks.

"It's true," she says to their child. "Julia was huge. She was everywhere."

"And I bladed right into her," Ezra says with satisfaction, the splendor of the story holding all of them in its embrace. For a moment they absorb the fact of being together in the darkened bedroom, just the three of them, the older child probably off somewhere brushing his teeth. Ezra says to his wife, from the low edge of the bed, "You remember that day," in the sure-sounding voice she'd first liked in history class, and huskily she answers him, "Mm-hmm, I do," when in fact she has been quickly sifting through her brain only to find that she has no memory of it at all.

This is the second time today that her mind has failed her, but the first instance was so mild that it barely registered. In the late afternoon, drowsily driving the boys to their martial-arts class, she heard on the radio a story about the chain restaurant Medieval Times, where diners can watch live jousting tournaments while eating without utensils. The big news was that the restaurant had decided to replace all of its resident kings with queens. Despite this change in leadership, the radio host remarked dryly, the servers at Medieval Times would still be referred to, going forward, as "wenches."

She perked right up at the sound of that friendly old word, which carried her instantly to the broken-backed couches and burnt-popcorn smell of their high-school student center. For a brief spell there, "wench" had been the slur of choice—originating with the boys, one had to guess, but soon enough used in good-natured address from girl to girl. To her ears, it summoned not so much a barefoot slut with a tankard as the lanky, lacrosse-playing classmates of her youth, addled on weak hallucinogens and jam bands. The word filled her with sadness and warmth. But she couldn't for the life of her recall how to use it convincingly in a sentence. "Hey, wench, good game today." "Stop being such a wench and pass the popcorn." "Later, wench." It all sounded wrong.

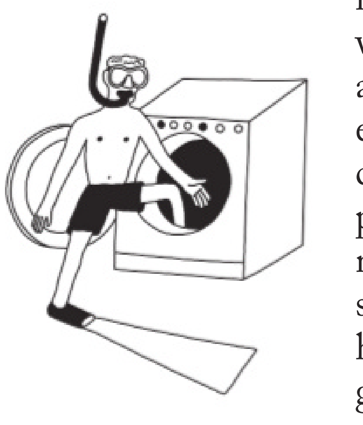
"Why are you talking to yourself?" her younger child asked from the back seat.

"I'm just trying to remember how to say something," she told him.

"In English?" he asked, sounding worried.

The problem, she sees now, is that in

its heyday she never seized the chance to say the word herself. Nor was it ever said to her. So the failure wasn't of memory but of another sort. She hadn't shaped her lips around the word; it hadn't been lobbed fondly in her direction. Somehow the lacrosse players had known not to say it to her, or for that matter to any of the black girls, few as they were. For them, a tone of collegial respect had been specially reserved. So many pleasant exchanges, straightforward smiles! She might as well have been wearing a pants suit during all those years. Yet dull Christina had been called a wench more times than could be counted. Along with a few humorous observations about the size of her mouth. Which would explain, wouldn't it, the popular opinion regarding her resemblance to—



"Funny that she didn't have an entourage in tow," she says.

"Was she being followed by the paparazzi?" the child asks.

"Nope," Ezra answers serenely. "She was completely alone. Enjoying the day."

"Without even a bodyguard?" his wife asks in the dark.

"Not as far as I could see. But, then again, I didn't see that it was Julia Roberts until I was looking down at her."

"Between your legs," the child says.

"I helped her back up to her feet and we each went on our way." Ezra is straightening out the comforter, by the sound of it. "I wasn't looking around for bodyguards. I wanted to get home as fast as I could and tell you."

"We didn't have cell phones," she explains.

"You were too poor," the child says soothingly.

She doesn't protest. The history of technology is too great an undertaking at this hour.

Also, it's true: they lived on very little then. Home was a garden-level apartment in a neglected corner of an outer borough, its distance to the nearest subway stop the original inspiration for the Rollerblades. From next door came the incoherent cries of an old man and the smell of decades' worth of fried meat. They kept the windows open in all seasons, because of both the smell and the furious radiators, controlled by some invisible hand.

A steel-legged café table with a laminate top was where they ate, worked, studied, and wrote thank-you notes. Despite the small checks that occasionally arrived in the mail from relatives living in less expensive places, Ezra still needed to have a part-time job while taking classes. He was descended from two generations of advanced-degree-holding black professionals who loved him unconditionally but regarded the project of "art school" with incredulity. Graduate work in painting? they'd repeat, as if maybe they had misunderstood. As for her, she'd inherited her parents' immigrant terror of nonfamilial debt, and so had yet to apply for even a credit card, much less to a graduate program. The programs were extortionists preying on directionless people in their mid to late twenties, she thought, and she wasn't interested. She liked the magic of direct deposit and also the green-bordered Social Security statement that would appear every few years, telling her just how much she had earned so far in her working life. After moving to New York, she promptly found employment, with benefits, in the alumni-relations office at Ezra's school. Her parents approved of the job but seemed undecided, even after all this time, about Ezra. When she watched television with them, the handsomeness of a young actor might make her mother pensive. "You have to be careful with a man who's better-looking than you," she'd been heard to say, to a character onscreen.

Every day his girlfriend set off for the university uncomplainingly, but Ezra wanted to be on campus no more than was required. Instead he got a job at a gym. He had to wear an orange polo shirt with the gym's logo stitched over his left pectoral. Standing at a counter, he scanned members' I.D. cards as they entered and then checked on the computer to make sure that their payments were up to date. This was how he first learned her name, Meg Sand. He was familiar with her name long before he noticed her looking at him from the lat machine. Or gazing, maybe. It was hard to tell the nature of the look from across the expanse of equipment, under the gym's flattening fluorescent light. Either way, she had her pale eyes fixed on him, and every once in a while, in the middle of a set, she gave him an effortful smile. The amount of weight she was lifting, he saw, was significant. An immense iron stack rose up slowly behind her like an omen.

"Thanks," she said, as she turned in her towel.

"Why, hello," he said jokingly, leaning forward on the counter.

Meg Sand wore a stretchy top that matched her reflective leggings, new sneakers, and a full face of makeup. The makeup wasn't loud; she looked like a girl who had moved to the city from upstate and, upon the shock of arrival, severely trained herself in how to do things nicely. She clutched a rather elegant brown purse. Her voice was deeper than he'd expected and when she spoke to him she sounded unnatural, as if she were a grownup trying to be pals with a kid. Did he also work out here? Or just work? She laughed lamely at herself. Yet Meg Sand was, according to the computer, practically the same age as him. Not even a full year older. It was her hair, he realized: she wore it short and gently teased, in a mature little pouf, a style chosen, he saw with a pang, to conceal the fact that it was thinning.

Quickly enough he developed the trick of not letting his eyes drift above her forehead. Sitting at the Polish restaurant around the corner from the gym, he would watch her tuck into a plate of cherry blintzes and finish off a big glass of ice water. She seemed to take undue pride in not being the type of gym-goer who only ate healthy. The booth's seats were sticky and made funny sounds whenever he adjusted himself, which he did often, sucking listlessly at a fountain soda and describing what had happened that week in crit. She would listen with a stolid expression and barely move. To his surprise, she did not share an upsetting story straightaway, as white girls who liked him were in the habit of doing, a story told slowly, as if with reluctance, but always aired fully by the time they were making out. Bulimia and bad parents. Depression. Social pressures, double standards, a sister who had been hospitalized. All offered unconsciously, he guessed, in a nervous spirit of redress. Yet Meg Sand rarely said anything about herself. And "girl," in her case, didn't exactly fit.

Without making a big fuss, she'd pay the bill for both of them. Together they would walk to his subway station and after giving her a brisk hug he'd jog downstairs into the clatter and the heat, feeling light of heart. Nothing was going on. Nothing was going on! He sailed into the basement apartment, pulled off his orange polo shirt, and made love to his beautiful girlfriend under the open window. He planned, any day now, to propose to her. But not on his knees: they already spent enough time practically underground as it was. Instead he imagined, absurdly, a wide, empty field, where he would toss the glittering ring in the air and she would catch it with outstretched hands.

It was not only his heart that felt newly light. His legs on the long walk to the subway, his hand as it moved across a thick sheet of paper. His adviser's caustic sense of humor, which had made him insecure at the start of the semester, was now a source of amusement and private laughter. The gym regulars no longer greeted him with "man" or "dude" but with his real name: "Hey, Ezra, what's up?" Rearranging the free weights took almost no effort at all. He felt agile and clearheaded. His skin looked good. Out of the depths of her boxy brown purse, Meg Sand produced little tubes and flasks of extravagant ointments made by companies he'd never heard of. She worked on the housewares floor of a large department store, but she claimed to have friends at all the cosmetic counters, and these were samples, she said. They were free.

From inside the humid broom closet they called their bathroom came his girlfriend's gentle voice. "I have to say, these look regular-sized to me," she said. He had emptied a shelf in the medicine cabinet so that he could create a display. The little flasks were elegant, and he had nothing to hide. Only a month before, the three of them had gone to the movies and watched a terrible action thriller. His idea—both the movie and Meg Sand and his girlfriend meeting. The whole thing had come together in such a casual way as to feel practically spontaneous.

His girlfriend had met him and Meg Sand at the theatre. She was coming straight from work, from an alumni networking event that she had helped organize, and as she approached them he could tell that one of her high heels had started to hurt her. He could also tell that she immediately took in the problem of Meg Sand's hair. Her whole face relaxed. The job in retail, the degree from SUNY Potsdam, now the hair: there truly was no cause for alarm. Meg stumbled backward slightly as his girlfriend went in for a hug. Oh, his girlfriend was a ruthless snob, as only the recently respectable can be. Before she even said hello, he knew that she would speak to Meg in the silvery, childlike voice she used when communicating with maintenance staff or bus drivers, as if making her voice smaller might somehow diminish the existential distance between them.

After the movie, they stood on the street, shivering. He didn't suggest that they go get a coffee somewhere. His girlfriend had slipped off her shoes in the theatre and, when the credits started to roll, had a difficult time getting them on. Her blouse was softly askew, the long day had loosened her hair, and he wanted to take her home and into bed.

But she persisted in being gracious. "Did you enjoy it?" she asked Meg, who paused, shot a furtive look at the movie poster, and then seemed to remember the risk-free response she had prepared for these occasions. "It wasn't what I was expecting," she said slowly. She gave one of her close-lipped, knowing smiles: a precaution she used all the time, he'd noticed, a smile showing that, whatever the joke at hand might be, she was in on it.

"Me neither!" his girlfriend replied. "A lot more blood than I signed up for. And all that gurgling when people died. It was very graphic. Or is that more sound design? They didn't leave anything to the imagination, did they? Her knife skills were . . . amazing."

Meg brightened a bit. "Amazing. Yes. I loved the fight sequences. She was so fierce. I think she must have trained for a long time to play the part. I read somewhere that she did most of the stunt work herself."

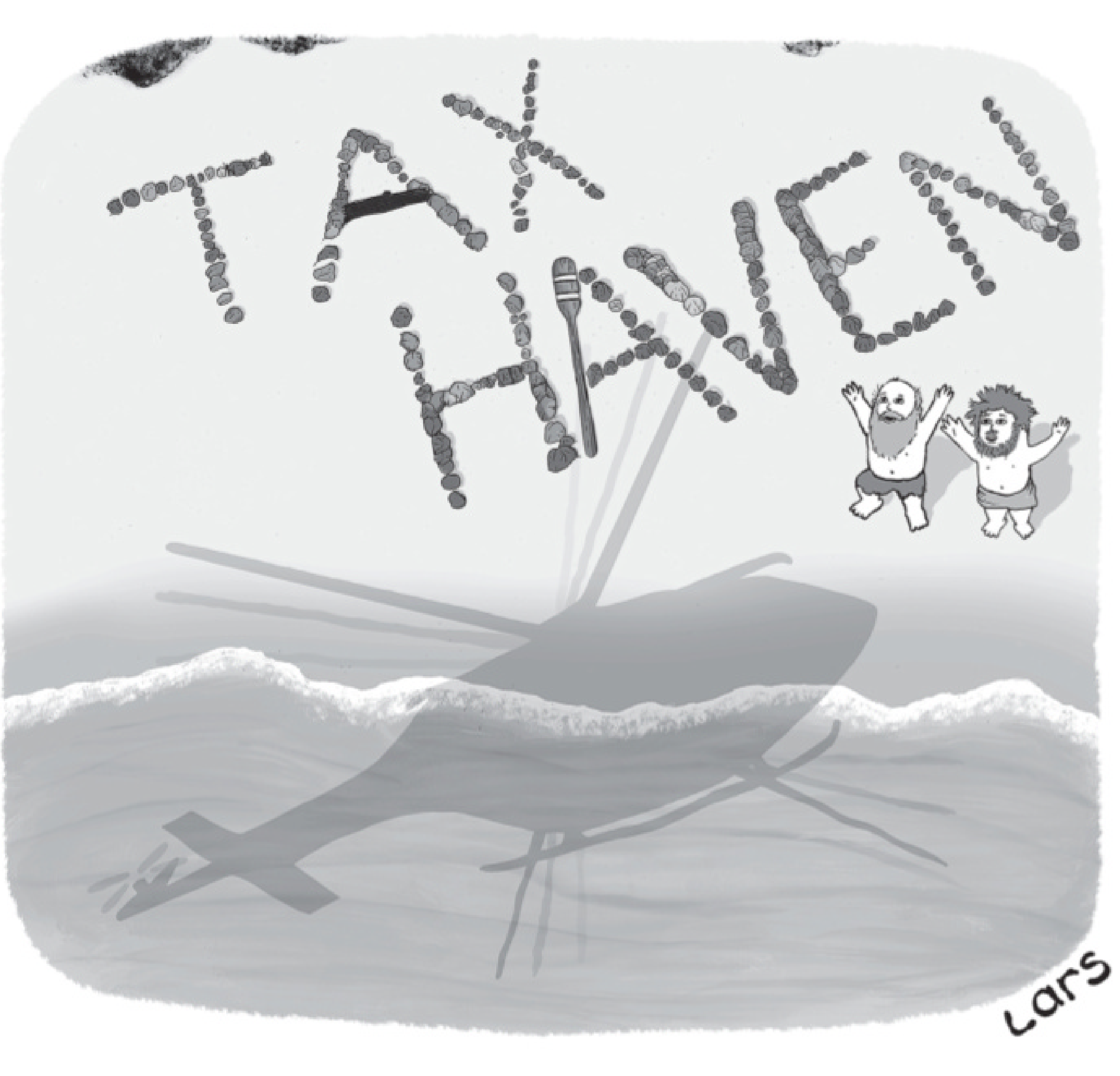
"Well, I believe it," his girlfriend said. "The action looked very real."

"I must have read that in the *Times*," Meg went on. "Yes, that must have been where I read it. In last weekend's Arts section."

"Oh! Did you see that piece about Merce Cunningham and the dog?"

Meg shook her head mutely.

"It was funny." His girlfriend smiled



at Meg with almost professional kindness. Then she tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. "You know, with that jacket on you kind of look like—" She said the forgettable name of the actress. "Especially the whole section when she's in Budapest. I'm not imagining it."

He didn't see the resemblance himself. He told them flatly that he thought the movie was garbage. "You thought so, too," he said to his girlfriend as they rode the subway home. She shrugged sleepily. "I didn't want to be judgmental," she murmured, placing her head on his shoulder. By the time they reached their stop, she was dead to the world. He had to guide her up the stairs and through the empty streets like a parent steering a child toward bed.

As winter dragged on, Meg Sand wore the jacket more often than not. Was it a coincidence that she also bought a pair of tall, zippered boots similar to the ones worn by the female assassin? "I used my employee discount," she said apologetically from her side of the booth. He'd had to ask for more hours at the gym, in order to recover from the reckless amount he'd spent on a new computer. Also, his girlfriend was preparing to take an unpaid leave from her job at the alumni office; she'd already used up all her vacation days by the time they found out about her mother's breast cancer. At first she had wept uncontrollably, but then she became very quiet and matter-of-fact, and started researching airfares. It was Stage II, they caught it early, she wouldn't even need chemo. A lumpectomy, not a mastectomy. These facts he repeated to Meg Sand in their corner of the Polish restaurant, as if to reassure himself. Nothing had prepared him for the secondhand jitters he was feeling. The container ship that had looked toylike on the horizon was now, upon making its way into port, revealing its true dimensions. Since the scheduling of the surgery, he'd been having trouble falling asleep, and though Meg ordered him a Coke, he hardly touched it.

With his girlfriend gone, he was thankful for the company of his new computer, which was much faster than his old one. The enormous monitor, the powerful processor, the highly sensitive keyboard—all necessary now that he had decided to expand his artistic practice into video. The over-all lack of light in the basement apartment was proving to be a plus. He was hypnotized by the way that editing could turn the sloppy footage he'd shot at school into something rich with possible meaning. A sudden cut to black, the amplification of ambient sound. Hours melted away without his realizing it. The first weekend he spent alone, he managed to get groceries and do his laundry, but the second weekend he didn't leave the apartment at all. When the telephone rang, he had no sense of what day it was, and as he answered, confused, his heart inexplicably racing, the unbearable thought that occurred to him was: She's dead.

"Ezra? I'm sorry to bother you." The deep, uninflected voice of Meg Sand was on the other end. He was briefly even more confused, and then strangely comforted that it was only her. "I know I shouldn't be calling this late. I tried calling two other people before I called you."

"Is it late?" he asked. "I don't even know what time it is."

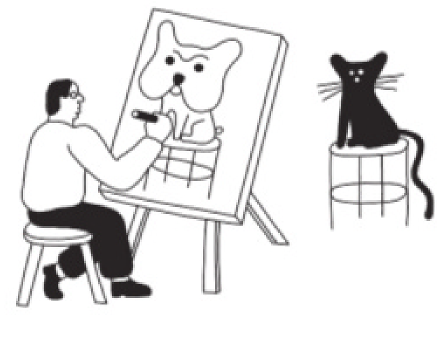
"It's 11:47," she replied. "It's almost midnight."

As she was speaking, he saw that the time had been right in front of him all along, tucked away in a corner of his vast computer screen. "Look at that," he said aloud.

Then he realized: "I think the last meal I ate was breakfast."

"I'm sorry," Meg said again, and fell silent before announcing, "But I've been robbed."

He flew across the city in the back of a Lincoln Town Car whose shocks seemed in need of immediate replacement. The traffic lights turned green one after the other, benevolently synchronized, as if wishing him Godspeed as he drew closer to Meg's apartment. He didn't know what he would find there. A jimmied lock, a gaping window, stuff spilling out of drawers, strewn across the floor, or . . . ? Darkened blocks scrolled past the smudged glass. With a sense of deliverance he understood that, whatever crisis he encountered, he'd be able to help. And if it turned out that in the end he couldn't—well, she was just a friend from the gym. Teeth rattling, he hurtled forward, at once weightless and full of purpose.



Her address was on York Avenue, which despite its Manhattan Zip Code appeared to be even more desolate and remote than where he lived. The car jerked to a stop in front of the building; he looked up at its expanse of monotonous mid-century brick and felt depressed for her. She was waiting in the lobby, dressed in her jacket and boots. He almost didn't notice the doorman sitting wordlessly at his station but then found himself wondering about him as they rose in the elevator. On the seventh floor, she led him down a carpeted corridor to her apartment door, which she unlocked with trembling hands. It swung open into a single room that contained her entire life: stove, bed, clothes rack, television, all laid out plainly before him. On the wall hung a poster-size reproduction of a black-and-white photograph of the Flatiron Building, framed. The bed was piled high with expensive-looking pillows of different shapes and sizes that she must have acquired through her job. She went to the little stove and started boiling water—not in a teakettle but in a saucepan.

"I hope you like chamomile," she said. "It's all I have."

He couldn't find an obvious place where he was meant to sit. He couldn't figure out what had been stolen. The room had a slightly tousled look but seemed otherwise intact.

"How did they get in?"

She turned from the stove and looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"The . . . robbers." He corrected himself. "Intruders." But maybe it had been someone working solo. "Intruder," he said, finally.

She blinked once, then twice, as if trying to bring him into focus. "It happened on the subway," she said. "Is that what you mean?"

"I don't mean anything. You're the one who said you were robbed." He glared at the apartment around him, searching for signs of entry. "And I said that I would come right over. Which I did."

"Thank you," Meg said. "Thank you for coming over. You didn't have to. I feel bad that it's so late."

"I don't care what time it is. I'm just not understanding what you—"

"It happened on the subway," she repeated. "It must have happened when I was on my way home from work. Because then I got back and took a shower and ordered Thai and when I went to pay the delivery guy I reached into my bag and it wasn't there."

"Your wallet?"

"Yes. It was gone. The last time I had it was when I pulled out a token."

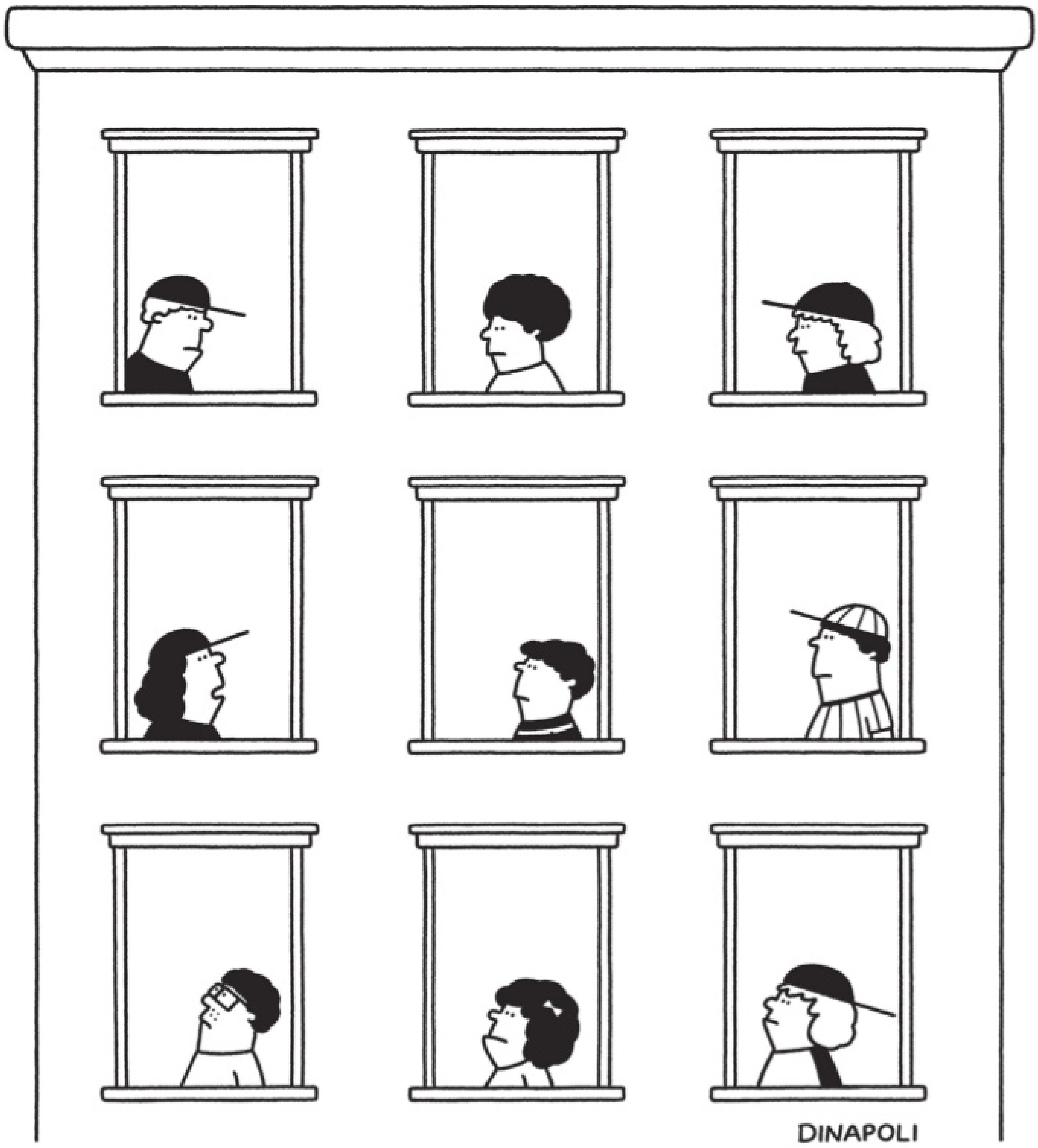
"You think someone stole it on the subway," he said dully. "Hours ago. Like a pickpocket."

"Yes," she answered solemnly, and handed him his cup of tea. "I do."

Before taking the cup, he put down his backpack, heavy with the hammer and nails he had brought. The tea smelled medicinal and was too hot to drink. He had paid thirty-eight dollars for the car service, with tip. He was overcome by the sudden, profound tiredness that comes right after a stupid expenditure of energy. Meg was now sitting on the edge of the bed, still wearing her jacket, as if she, too, were a guest. Without asking, he sank down beside her and placed his cup on the floor. He was too exhausted even to be angry anymore.

"So," he said. "This is your place."

"Welcome," she said, and with a little sigh rested her fragile head of hair on his shoulder. "I'm glad you're here."



"Remember, when we get to go back outside, it's still the top of the fifth. Jodie's on second, Noah's at bat, and the count is one-and-two."

At least that's how Ezra's wife has imagined it, their unpromising start. Some details, such as the poster of the Flatiron Building and the mound of fancy pillows, she is familiar with from the video; some—the lat machine, the good purse, the booths at the Polish restaurant—she knows firsthand; the rest are the result of inference and extrapolation. It is rare for her to think at all of Meg Sand anymore, but the mention of Julia Roberts there in the dark has brought her back.

When Ezra recalls his years in graduate school, his memory has occasionally confused or conflated the two of them—her and Meg. To be fair, the instances have been very few. In one case, she had to remind him that they didn't watch the Knicks lose to the Spurs in the finals; she was in Florida with her parents. Also, she can say with certainty that she's never discovered a mouse behind the toaster oven. Or been pickpocketed on the subway. She wonders if the same could be true of the rollerblading event. She believes that it was an experience he enthusiastically recounted at the time, just not to her.

Yet her memory is not without its own shortcomings. She cannot remember, for example, Meg Sand's last name. Sand is just something she's made up as a placeholder. Whatever the real name is, she thinks, it must be so ordinary, so unremarkable, as to be mind-numbing in the most literal sense. For a while she thought it might have been Whitman, until she realized that that was the name of the C.E.O. who had run unsuccessfully for governor of California. Because she can't remember Meg Sand's real name, she hasn't been able to repeat it to herself and she hasn't been able to look her up online.

But she doubts that she would ever type Meg's name into a search box, even if she could. Her curiosity is nil. There's nothing more she wants to know. For the nearly twenty years that she's had the video in her possession, not once has she felt the faintest need to watch it again. The first time was enough, and even then she didn't watch it all the way through. Very clearly she remembers how surprised she was that she could operate the playback function on the camera in the first place. She'd never used the camera before or been interested in how it worked. But there was something about the way it was resting beneath Ezra's desk, balanced casually on top of the paper shredder, its little screen popped open, that made her stop.

She put down the box she was carrying. Inside, still in its protective wrapping, was a five-piece place setting of the wedding china that Ezra's aunts had gently insisted they register for. There was no room or use for china in their basement apartment. With ceremonial care she had been stacking the boxes in the corner of the bedroom not taken up by Ezra's enormous computer. Though he had gallantly carried her over the threshold, marriage had done little to change their abode other than to make it feel smaller and darker. When she put down the china, the last to arrive, her hands were shaking. This is another detail she recalls with perfect clarity: her hands shaking even before she picked up the camera and turned it on.

A bed piled with tasselled pillows; a framed black-and-white poster, only a corner of which appears in the shot; a long white body, naked except for a pair of knee-high gladiator sandals. The soles of the sandals as flat and beige as pancakes.

And then from offscreen his voice, the voice that she had first heard in history class, telling the body what he'd like it to do.

She couldn't hit the square of the Stop button quickly enough. Straightaway she ejected the cassette, which was smaller than a tin of breath mints. She wandered back and forth the length of the apartment, holding it carefully in the palm of her hand. She thought about stuffing it down to the bottom of the garbage can, or wrapping it in layers of newspaper and tossing it in a dumpster, or dropping it down the echoing trash chute at work. She also thought about cracking open the plastic shell and plucking out the two black reels inside and melting them over the stove—then wondered about the strands of videotape she sometimes saw tangled in the branches of the borough's trees. How did they end up there? Meanwhile, a cold little part of her counselled prudence: keep it safe. At which she recoiled: it would poison her. After several minutes of this, she called Ezra at the gym to say that she was leaving him. The word "divorce" she avoided, not wanting to sound operatic. By the time he arrived home, she had already changed her mind ten or eleven times about what she needed to do.

He was breathing very hard. He had run the entire way from the distant subway stop. On his sweating face was the naked look of fear that comes with having loved someone for a long time. "You're still here," he panted. The look on his face summoned out of her chaotic feelings the lifelong habit of pragmatism, which caused her to say with formality, "She is not to see or contact us ever again," a message that she repeated a few days later, when Meg Sand called the apartment, and she was startled to hear herself speak not in her lilting telephone voice but in an unfamiliar and shaky middle register that seemed to emanate directly from her chest. She hung up the receiver before Meg could respond. Her mind was still changing rapidly, hourly. The only thing she knew for certain was that the video had become hers in some permanent, irrefutable way. She buried the cassette in the deep pocket of a shearling coat she no longer wore but that still hung thickly at the back of the closet, and so it remained there undisturbed for many years and through several moves, until the technology required to play it had all but disappeared.

Could the nature of the video be interpreted in a different way? The therapist at the university health center had asked her this question. Your husband is studying art, she said, double-checking the open folder in her lap. Was there anything—the therapist searched for a word—artistic about what you saw?

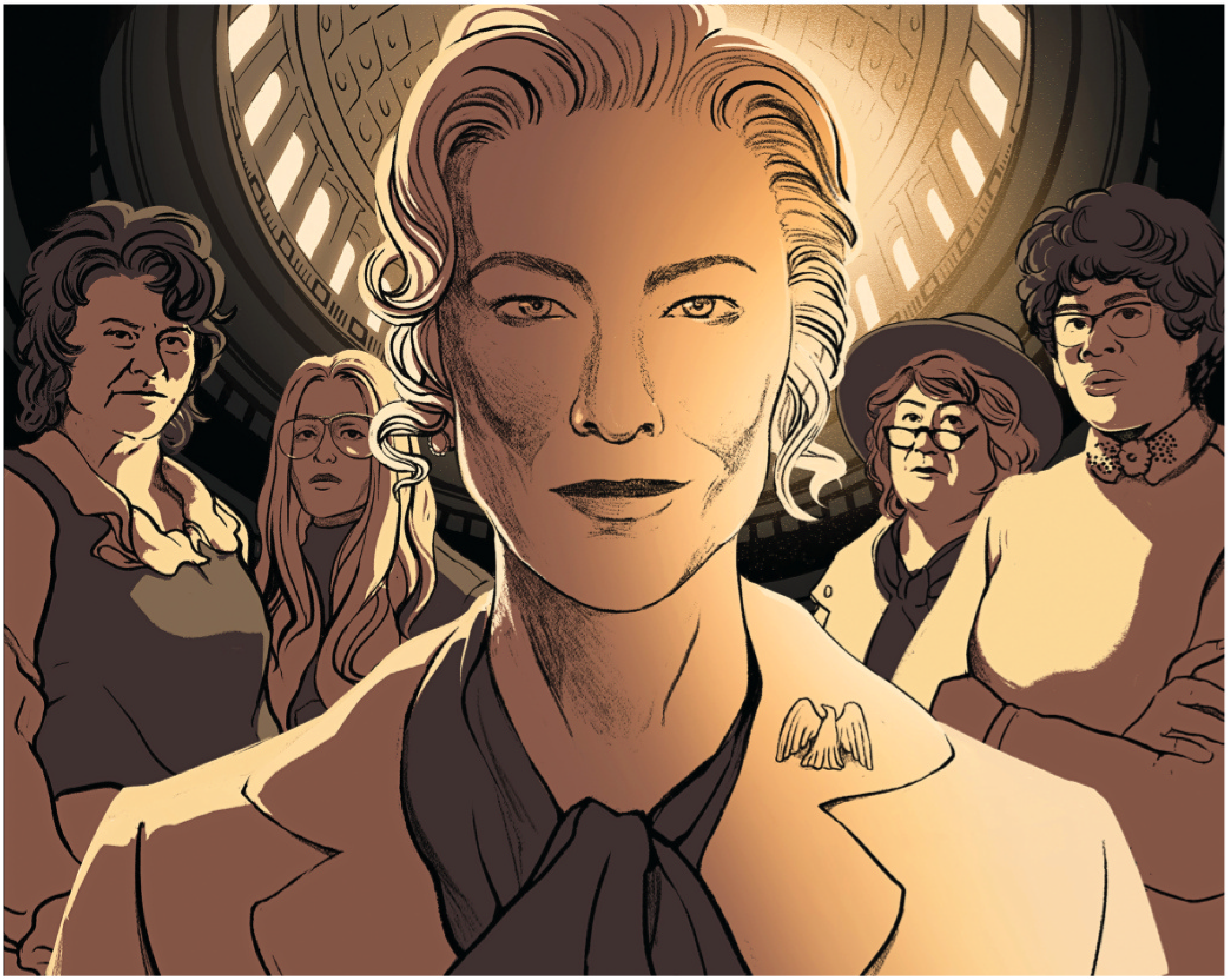
Grimly, she said no. They had been over this before. Therapy was turning out to deserve the suspicion with which she had always held it, but under her benefits plan the first six sessions were free. The truth is, she was too shy to explain to the therapist why she had instantly recognized the sort of video she was watching. Just as she was too shy to keep her eyes open while making them. Darkness was essential, she couldn't explain; darkness was key.

The darkness created when he turned on the camera and she closed her eyes—was it the same element that she's standing in now, listening to him say good night to their child? She likes to think that it is, the dark being the only thing large, comfortable, and cluttered enough to contain all the various bits and pieces of their life together. So many years between them, and from where exactly does one begin to count? The first day of ninth grade, or the short, rainy summer after graduation? The moment they signed a lease and became residents of the basement apartment? There is no single starting point, only the density and shapelessness of experience held in common, the meals prepared and eaten, the assorted haircuts and injuries, elations and malaises, car leases and checking accounts, friends made, trips taken, a pregnancy that failed and two that didn't. She remembers: the shock of a baby's cold mouth on her nipple after he spat out an ice pop and chose her breast instead. He remembers: her shout of laughter. Now their younger child kicks experimentally at the comforter, unwilling to go to sleep, while the older one makes his way up the stairs, halting at irregular intervals, absorbed no doubt by the game in his hand, lighting his face from below as he moves slowly toward them.

"Pick up the pace, kid." Ezra casts his voice toward the door. "We're all waiting."

It is the same voice, and also the same darkness: the darkness out of which this voice once floated, low-pitched and warm, patiently unfolding and finding her on the bed, the bed seeming to lift imperceptibly off the floor, set aloft yet lightly tethered, his voice telling her what he saw, what he liked, the things he wished to see more of. At the sound of his voice, she relaxed into the pleasure of being instructed, and then more deeply into the pleasure of being seen, and running beneath it all was a bright, nearly invisible current of thankfulness. To be called such things. In words far worse, or far better, than whatever had been said in high school. Tipping back her head and closing her eyes, she felt capable of doing anything he asked. She saw pictures: a bar of sunlight flaring on a mirror; the square, golden windows of a long motel at night. His steady voice spoke to her in the dark. "Wider," he said, and she opened farther than she had thought possible. ♦

THE WRITER'S VOICE PODCAST
The author reads "Bedtime Story."



ON TELEVISION

PROGRESS REPORT

"Mrs. America," on FX.

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX

You are likely familiar with the exit-poll result, in 2016, that suggested that fifty-three per cent of white American women voted for Donald Trump. Never mind that such polls are notoriously imprecise; the statistic was used, repeatedly, as evidence to disprove the assumption that most women want a female President. Since then, introspection and grief have caused liberals to ask not just why white women voted for Trump but why some of us ever thought they wouldn't. The new FX miniseries "Mrs. America"—created by Dahvi Waller ("Mad Men")—provides answers to both questions in its intensely psychological portrait of Phyllis Schlafly, the godmother of the modern anti-feminist movement, played with frightening, actressy charisma by Cate Blanchett. (She was also an executive producer on the series.) A nervy, nine-episode period piece about the fight over the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, "Mrs. America" feels like the product of a shift in pop

Cate Blanchett's Phyllis Schlafly is a pastel nightmare, arch and juicily camp.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANGELICA ALZONA

feminist consciousness: a post-Clinton critique of the savior model and of pink-pussy-hat resistance.

It's easy to imagine an alternate "Mrs. America"—a sappier, more complacent historical drama that might have taken, as its opening, the last scene of the pilot, in which, in 1972, the founding members of the National Women's Political Caucus celebrate in the Washington, D.C., office of the activist and politician Bella Abzug (played by a saucy Margo Martindale). Ambitious costuming and wig direction help us identify, in the mix, the popular saints of second-wave feminism: Gloria Steinem (Rose Byrne), with her long hair middle-parted and her aviator glasses; Shirley Chisholm (Uzo Aduba), with her black-salon bouffant; Betty Friedan (Tracy Ullman), her big hair streaked, skunklike, with gray. The Senate has passed the E.R.A., sending it to the states for ratification, and Chisholm, the country's first black congresswoman, has announced her Presidential bid. The women's toast to progress is interrupted by a staffer bearing the opposition research: a copy of "The Phyllis Schlafly Report," a newsletter published monthly by a homemaker in Alton, Illinois.

"Who the hell is Phyllis *Schaffly*?" Friedan spits, mispronouncing the name. The moment, which captures the radical élite's reflexive dismissal of the allure of white conservatism, is all the more powerful because, in *this* "Mrs. America," we have already been warned. The series is an ensemble vehicle, with each episode following a different character, but it opens with Schlafly—introduced by an m.c. in a bikini competition at a charity fund-raiser as "the wife of one of our biggest donors, Mrs. J. Fred Schlafly"—and stays with her throughout. A mother of six and a Radcliffe graduate, she has had a failed run for Congress and carries with her an air of thwarted ambition. At a meeting with Barry Goldwater in D.C., at which she hopes to advise on his nuclear policy, she is asked instead to take notes. Schlafly and her husband (John Slattery) are locked in a simmering, kinky battle of intelligences, but, in the evening, as he presses his weight on her, his needs win. Schlafly sets out as the most dangerous type of powermonger: one without power.

When Alice (Sarah Paulson), a kind of surrogate daughter, first brings the E.R.A. to her attention, claiming that the libbers will force their daughters into the draft, Schlafly swiftly assembles an army of housewives who view "equal rights" as an implicit criticism of their choices. Schlafly's "Stop E.R.A." campaign lands her on talk shows and in lecture halls; her vast mailing list piques the interest of Ronald Reagan, who is running for President. Her crusade to protect the traditional family involves travel, long hours, and the kind of industry that looks suspiciously like a successful career; meanwhile, she relies on her sister-in-law, Eleanor (played with muted heartbreak by Jeanne Tripplehorn), and her smiling black maids to take care of the children. A good bio-pic performance captures a historical figure, but a transcendent one can effectively destroy her, outdoing the original in our cultural memory. Blanchett's Schlafly is a pastel nightmare, arch and juicily camp.

Trump spoke at Schlafly's funeral, in 2016, apparently aware of his debt to her strategy, and there are oblique references to the Trump era in "Mrs. America"—in the finale, Schlafly greets two baby-faced lawyers named Paul Manafort and Roger Stone. But the series mostly avoids the premonitions that dog the storytelling of such dramas as Ava DuVernay's 2019 "When They See Us," based on the Central Park jogger case. It is clear where the sympathies of the show's creators lie, and as the prim staginess of the Schlafly suburban universe gives way to apartments in New York City and offices in Washington, the cinematography becomes warmer—reminiscent of Frederick Wiseman documentaries and stomp-down-the-street seventies dramas. Yet the feminist fighters, drawn with less specificity and more reverence, are inevitably less interesting. Abzug is the pushy yenta of the Senate, a pragmatist willing to make concessions to secure male allies. The only Republican in the caucus, Jill Ruckelshaus (Elizabeth Banks), is a symbol of the impending death of bipartisanship. The weakest characterization is that of the spritelike Steinem, whose primary anxiety appears to be the fear that her peers tolerate her only because of her value as the movement's sex symbol, and who swans through the series, cigarette in hand, eyes furrowed in telegenic sorrow for the sisters who have it harder than her.

The most recognizable faces of the feminist movement have always been white, and "Mrs. America" prides itself on reminding us why without ever quite redressing the balance. In one scene, Steinem argues with the "money guy" at *Ms.*, who is reluctant to put Chisholm on the cover because she will "depress sales, especially in the South." When Abzug, eager to hitch the E.R.A. fight to George McGovern's Presidential candidacy, admonishes Chisholm for continuing her symbolic campaign, Chisholm responds, mightily, "I didn't get anywhere in this life waiting on someone's permission." But Chisholm, in reality a staunch, ingenious politician, is portrayed as an egoless exemplar of political duty. Meanwhile, the legendary lawyer Flo Kennedy, played by the perpetually underrated Niecy Nash, delivers clapbacks to black feminists seeking to exclude black lesbians from their ranks. From the narrative sidelines, she *represents*, but the show doesn't let her live or love.

The eighth episode is a memorable set piece: at the National Women's Conference, in Houston, Alice, Schlafly's follower, accidentally takes a psychedelic and goes through the looking glass, wandering into a Pete Seeger sing-along with the feminists. But there is something too easy about the satisfaction gained from watching a woman escape Schlafly's orbit when the woman in question is one of the show's few fictional characters. Ullman's portrayal of the middle-aged Friedan, the intellectual founder of the movement, feels, by contrast, painfully real. Friedan is among the first of the feminists to take Schlafly seriously, agreeing to debate her at Illinois State University—not just because she feels a moral imperative to quash Schlafly's rise but because she sees the event as an opportunity to retrieve the renown she has lost to the movement's younger figures, primarily Steinem. In one scene, we watch as Friedan, preparing for a date, opens her closet and fondles a flower-print dress that she wore, years earlier, on a talk show. The moment is quiet, almost taboo. Friedan may be fighting for equality, but she is also a woman, wanting to remember what it feels like to be adored. ♦

BOOKS

BLACK, NO SUGAR

The war on coffee.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

The literature of coffee has produced a new genre: corrective history.

"What would life be without coffee?" King Louis XV of France is said to have asked. "But, then, what is life even with coffee?" he added. Truer, or more apt, words for the present moment were never spoken, now usable as a kind of daily catechism. At a time when coffee remains one of the few things that the anxious sleeper can look forward to in the morning (*What is life without it*?), giving as it does at least an illusion of recharge and a fresh start, the charge has invariably slipped away by the time the latest grim briefing comes (*What is life even with it*?). Imagining life without coffee right now is, for many of us, almost impossible, even though the culture of the café that arose in America over the past couple of decades has, for some indefinite period, been shut down.

The growth of coffee as a culture, not just as a drink, can be measured in a unit that might be called the Larry, for the peerless comedy writer Larry David. In "Seinfeld," which he co-created in 1989, coffee came as a normal beverage in a coffee shop—bad, indistinct stuff that might as well have been tea. (Paul Reiser had a nice bit about the codependency of coffee and tea, with tea as coffee's pathetic friend.) Then, on "Friends," the characters gathered in a coffee-specific location, Central Perk, but the very invocation of a percolator, the worst way to brew, suggested that they were there more for the company than for the coffee. Six or so Larrys later, by 2020, the plotline of an entire season of David's own "Curb Your Enthusiasm" turned on a competition between Mocha Joe's and Latte Larry's—the "spite store" that Larry opens just to avenge an insult over scones, with many details about a specific kind of Mexican coffee bean he means to steal. The audience was expected to accept as an obvious premise the idea that coffee was a culture of devotion and discrimination, not just a passable caffeinated drink.

This change is real, and is reflected in the numbers. As Jonathan Morris documents in his recent book, "Coffee: A Global History" (Reaktion), epicurean coffeehouses in the United States numbered in the hundreds in 1989, and in the tens of thousands by 2013. A lot of that is Starbucks, but not all. Roasters in Italy went from exporting twelve million kilograms of espresso in 1988 to more than a hundred and seventy million in 2015. Not surprisingly, the growth of a coffee culture has been trailed, and sometimes advanced, by a coffee literature, which arrived in predictable waves, each reflecting a thriving genre. First, we got a fan's literature—"the little bean that changed the world"—with histories of coffee consumption and appreciations of coffee preparations. (The language of wine appreciation was adapted to coffee, especially a fixation on terroir—single origins, single estates, even micro lots.) Then came the gonzo, adventurer approach: the obsessive who gives up normal life to pursue coffee's mysteries. And, finally, a moralizing literature that rehearsed a familiar lecture on the hidden cost of the addiction.

The most entertaining of the coffee-as-adventure books is Stewart Lee Allen's "The Devil's Cup" (1999), which helped establish the wild-man school of gastronomic appreciation. Allen, in a tone that marries Anthony Bourdain with S. J. Perelman, ventures jauntily on a pilgrimage to all coffee's holy places, from Ethiopia to Turkey, meeting everyone from the keeper of Rimbaud's house in Harar to someone who still knows how to make coffee from roasted leaves. Searching for the origins of the coffeehouse, Allen supplies much lively anthropological detail, dense with many stalwart sentences: "Everyone had warned me against taking the overnight train from Konya to Istanbul. They said it took twice as long as the bus (nonsense), that it was unsafe (rubbish) and so overheated that passengers' clothing caught fire (this is actually true)." There is also much lubricious detail:

> In the Oromo culture of western Ethiopia, the coffee bean's resemblance to a woman's sexual organs has given birth to another *bunqalle* ceremony with such heavy sexual significance. . . . After the beans are husked, they are stirred in the butter with a stick called *dannaba*, the word for penis. . . . As the beans are

ILLUSTRATION BY ILYA MILSTEIN

> stirred another prayer is recited until finally the coffee fruits burst open from the heat, making the sound *Tass!* This bursting of the fruit is likened to both childbirth and the last cry of the dying man.

For all the book's Hunter S. Thompson curlicues, the essential information is communicated. The coffee bean comes in two basic families, arabica and the inferior (though easier to grow) robusta. It thrives in high terrains, and, like wine grapes, it does best in seemingly inhospitable environments—rocky and volcanic soil on mountainsides. An alternative to alcohol, coffee was central to teetotalling Islamic civilization in the Middle Ages, and spread from Turkey to points west, where the coffeehouse became the cockpit of the Enlightenment, and even up to little Iceland, where it became the national sacrament. Throughout, Allen's assumption is that everyone craves coffee, and that, while the craving may lead to many superstitions and black-market absurdities, the craving in itself is good. In the spirit of the time, craving was living.

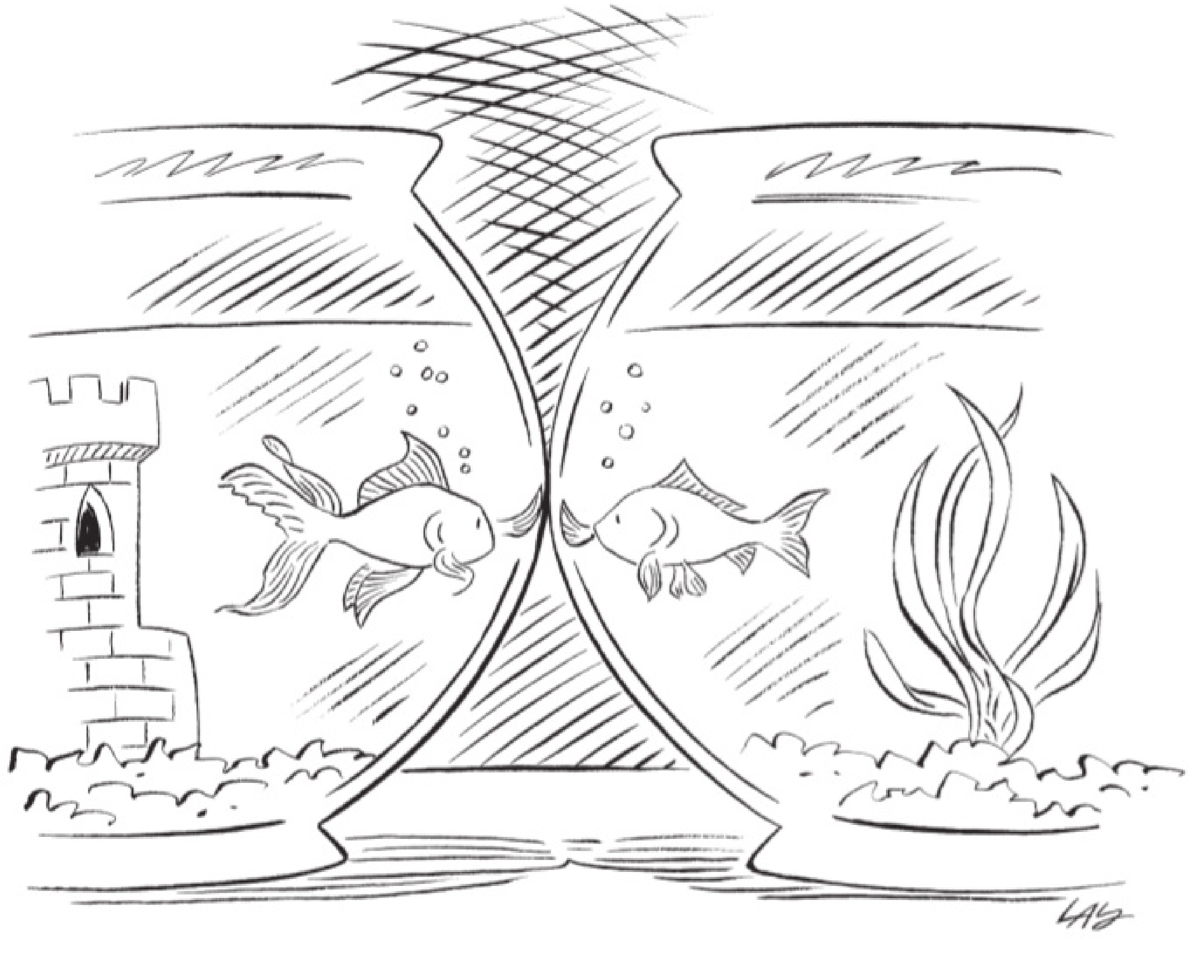
It was fun while it lasted. Now the strictures of a corrective literature have come for coffee. Augustine Sedgewick's "Coffeeland: One Man's Dark Empire and the Making of Our Favorite Drug" (Penguin Press), as the title announces, tells a story not very different from the kind that might be told of Colombian cocaine production and narco-terrorism, with another product that offers simulated energy to money-driven people. Coffee got produced by something like slavery and was then pushed on a pliant proletariat by big business and the Yanqui dollar. Americans, under the pressure of mass marketing and pseudo-scientific propaganda, have been encouraged to drink ever more coffee while the peasants of El Salvador suffer and die in the brutally efficient coffee monoculture promoted by plantation growers. Both North and Central America became "coffeelands"—a peasantry making the drug, a proletariat consuming it.

The first moral that this new literature brings out—a commodity that was a huge aid to the European Enlightenment was a huge drag on the people who made it—can be found as well in Antony Wild's 2004 book, "Coffee: A Dark History." Even Stewart Allen couldn't conceal the truth that growing and harvesting coffee is luckless and backbreaking work. A built-in divide separates things we hunt and things we grow: hooking swordfish and netting tuna have been the subject of romances, since the erotic aura of the chase still attaches to them. But there's nothing romantic about mass agriculture, no matter how prized its products are. Virgil's Georgics—a propaganda poem ostensibly in praise of farming—makes plain that frugality, austerity, and repetition are the farmer's civilization-supporting but lamentable lot.

But, far beyond the hardships of farming, the story that Sedgewick details (and Wild sketches) identifies a system of exploitation powered by fine-toothed gears. It is much like the story of sugar told by Sidney Mintz in his epoch-marking "Sweetness and Power," from 1985: sweet are the uses of adversity, Shakespeare's Duke says, and adverse are the sources of sweetness, Mintz replies. What sweetened the cup of Europeans was bitter to the people who produced it.

Extremely wide-ranging and well researched, Sedgewick's story reaches out into American political history, not to mention the history of American breakfast, but it is mostly set in El Salvador, where a large-scale monoculture of coffee began, at the turn of the twentieth century, under the fiendishly brilliant direction of a British expat named James Hill. Originally from Manchester, the birthplace of the British industrial revolution, Hill, in the nineteen-twenties, imposed a program of modern serfdom on the indigenous Salvadoran people in order to grow coffee on an unprecedented scale. Recognizing that wages were of limited value to a peasantry who largely didn't live within the cash economy, Sedgewick writes, Hill "used food rather than money to attract people" to work for him, "offering an extra half-ration, one tortilla and beans, for the completion of each task. The extra rations were always given as breakfast, which was a double incentive, for only workers who arrived at the plantations before 6 a.m. qualified for breakfast—serving stopped and work started at 6:00 sharp." Hill had the Fitzcarraldo-like obsessiveness of the European in Latin America: he wouldn't use child labor, but kids served as messengers between mill and plantation and were treated like something close to hostages, their welfare guaranteed as long as their parents worked; elderly people were recruited as spies, reporting on slackers among the working peasants.

Sedgewick concedes that this program was less total than it might sound. Because coffee-growing was booming, peasants could usually find a marginally more humane deal in the next plan-

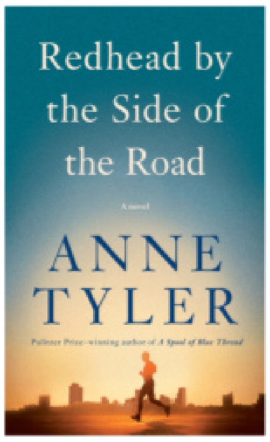


tation. But given capitalism's inclination to cancel competition rather than encourage it—a truth known to John Kenneth Galbraith as much as to Karl Marx—coffee was handed over to an oligarchy that had coalesced by the nineteen-thirties. Eventually, a legendary "fourteen families" came to dominate El Salvador's coffee plantations, aided by a complicated program of American investment. When, in 1932, the peasants rose in a revolt, led by the Communist revolutionary Farabundo Martí, they were mowed down in the thousands, and their leaders, Martí included, were summarily executed. (A brigade of guerrillas fighting under Martí's name bedevilled Ronald Reagan's Central American policy fifty years later.)

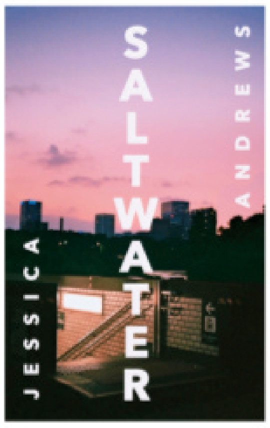
The originality and ambition of Sedgewick's work is that he insistently sees the dynamic between producer and consumer—Central American peasant and North American proletarian—not merely as one of exploited and exploiter but as a manufactured co-dependence between two groups both exploited by capitalism. "Cravings" are not natural appetites but carefully created cultural diktats. Coffee is sold less to provide an individual with pleasure than to support an industry with a skillfully primed audience. The objective of capitalist coffee production, in Sedgewick's view, was "the foreclosure of the possibility of unproductive eating, being, doing—ways of living that were not directly convertible into cash on the world market." American workers were compelled to drink the stuff as Central American peasants were compelled to make it. The coffee lobby bought scientific studies to sell American industrialists on the notion that caffeine was the ideal productivity enhancer. One manufacturer served free coffee, because, according to an industry advertorial, it insured that workers would remain in peak form, keeping "the standard set by the early morning hours more nearly stable" for the rest of the day. If faith is the opiate of the masses, then coffee is their stimulant. Sedgewick suggests that profit-seeking bosses deliberately addicted American workers to the beverage, in ways that recall the drug industry's dissemination of opioids to the same masses a century later.

To be sure, Sedgewick recognizes that the actual history of caffeine and

BRIEFLY NOTED



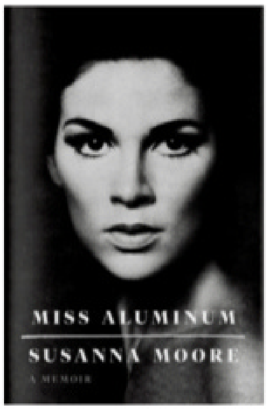
Redhead by the Side of the Road, *by Anne Tyler (Knopf).* This simple but affecting story follows Micah, a man in his forties who spends his days providing tech support to elderly clients, and his evenings with a casual girlfriend. "Does he ever stop to consider his life?" the novel asks. "It's almost certain nobody's ever asked him." His placidity is disturbed when a teen-ager shows up on his doorstep, wrongly convinced that Micah is his father. The encounter brings Micah back into contact with a former girlfriend and spurs him to examine the rut into which his life has fallen. Tyler has the rare ability to evoke the ordinary with particularity, and the novel, though concerned with small events, insists on the dignity of its characters and the seriousness of their problems.



Saltwater, *by Jessica Andrews (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).* "I felt everything so deeply," Lucy, the narrator of this heady novel, declares. After her grandfather dies, she and her mother travel from the North of England to coastal Ireland to sift through his belongings. Lucy stays on and, in the stillness of the town, takes stock of her past. Impressionistic recollections of her alcoholic father's periodic disappearances, her adolescent sexual awakenings, and her time at college in London coalesce into a characterization of a young woman taught by her mother's example how to navigate a society ruled by men. Drinking, dancing, and reading allow Lucy to experience her life fully, and to grasp that to be present in the world she must allow its weight to dissipate.

Lurking
How a Person Became a User
Joanne McNeil

Lurking, *by Joanne McNeil (MCD).* This cultural history of the Internet's social aspects uses the proverbial lurker—a user who silently surveys the feeds of friends, exes, or strangers—as a frame. Mixing personal anecdotes and academic analyses, McNeil examines a range of technological innovations, and traces their influence on today's online world: the now defunct Friendster prefigured many current social platforms, and early video feeds by "camgirls," broadcasting their lives to paying audiences, were a forerunner of Twitch live streams. Describing the sense of community that emerged on Twitter during a hashtag campaign by feminists, she writes, "It was a shared experience, despite the fragmentary delivery, like passing a kaleidoscope around a campfire."



Miss Aluminum, *by Susanna Moore (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).* In this vibrant memoir, a well-known novelist chronicles her troubled childhood and gallivanting twenties. At seventeen, Moore leaves her home state of Hawaii, fleeing a negligent father and a wicked stepmother, and haunted by the death of her mentally unstable mother. A wealthy neighbor from her childhood is the first in a series of fairy godmothers who step in to help, and soon she is modelling in Los Angeles, meeting famous people, and jumping from relationship to relationship. Having a child—Roman Polanski and Joan Didion become godparents—frees Moore from the shadow of her mother's troubles: "I no longer thought that I was like her, too fragile, too crazy to survive."

capitalist efficiency is more complicated than one might expect. Famous "rationalizers" of industrial work, including Frederick W. Taylor, saw coffee drinking as more distracting than energizing. Taylor, with his mechanistic take on human physiology, sided with the breakfast-cereal creators John Harvey Kellogg and C. W. Post, who had a dim view of coffee. At the same time, Sedgewick perhaps ascribes undue propagandistic power to the public-relations exercises of coffee producers. Like many radical historians, Sedgewick has a passionate feeling for detail, but lacks a sense of irony. Ordinary people saw through advertising campaigns then as readily as academic historians see through them now. No one, hearing that Chock Full o'Nuts is the heavenly coffee, has ever thought it actually was.

Sedgewick's approach can seem dutifully leftist, but the evidence suggests that socialist models of production have hardly humanized the demands of agricultural labor. The problem, it emerges, is of a planetary enslavement to a monocrop existence. Agriculture, practiced on a mass scale, is the original sin of modernity. As Morris's history of coffee emphasizes, Vietnam, after its victory against the United States, made itself one of the world's chief producers of coffee, harvesting vast amounts of cheap robusta, first for the Soviet dependencies in Eastern Europe and then for a global market, with peasant labor and horrific environmental degradation of the country's highland coffee farms. Whatever else this was, it was clearly not an issuance of capitalist hegemony.

Sedgewick, in a tradition of protest literature rooted more in William Blake than in Marx, sees mankind chained to a treadmill of obedience leading only to oblivion. His book is filled with nostalgic glimpses of prelapsarian Central America, the Eden before Columbus and Hill, and he concludes with a vision of a new order in which "food sovereignty" will emerge as "a direct rebuke to the core order of the modern world . . . pulling up the root of the international coffee economy, cutting off the principal mechanism of long distance connection between people who work coffee and people who drink coffee." Communities in rural El Salvador will then be left alone to attend to the business of eating and feeding, "picking wild fruit, tending tomatoes and blackberries, cultivating corn and beans, raising chickens, hunting and fishing, cooking with family, feeding children, sharing with neighbors, welcoming friends, eating anytime, and going back for more, again."

A milder, milkier case against coffee advances from another front in Michael Pollan's new audiobook, "Caffeine" (Audible). After the evangelical, psychedelic enthusiasms of his last book, "How to Change Your Mind," he proves to be ambivalent about the jumping bean. Accepting the life-enhancing and surprisingly medicinal effects of coffee, he also relates how, in his own experience, breaking a coffee addiction can be a step toward self-discovery: it was the coffee that was waking up and doing all that writing. He sees it as a wonder energy drug—cocaine for the masses—but, where others have taken the coffeehouses of Europe primarily as seedbeds for the Enlightenment, he, like Sedgewick, focusses on caffeine's role in the regimentation of work. For all the good it does us, Pollan argues, coffee is also ruining our sleep. The caffeine addict—king or commoner—must decide whether sleep may be a more powerfully salubrious remedy than the coffee that ends it.

Not much hope there for the coffee lover. One turns back to Stewart Lee Allen's work, which, though far from polemical, does contain a useful politics. It is the ancient politics of pleasure understood as something won eternally from pain—or, as St. Augustine would put it, from original sin. Most pleasures, after all, rely on someone else's pain, or the possibility of it. Sex has, historically, jeopardized lives through disease, abuse, and, for women, the high risks of childbirth. The goal of a good life should be not to denounce the pleasures but to minimize the pain. With some pursuits, the pain seems so inherent that we must end the pleasure. Bullfighting, boxing, foie gras, and football all fall somewhere in this zone. In other instances, we believe that we can retain the enjoyment and alleviate the suffering.

In fact, efforts to humanize Salvadoran coffee growing continue, and, though seemingly successful mostly on the margins, the margins are where such success begins. Rainforest Alliance certification, "bird-friendly" certification, and the rest are far from mere window dressing when it comes to protecting habitats. Several coöperatives in El Salvador, encouraged by the energetic activists at Equal Exchange, the pioneering fair-trade coffee retailer, seem to be now producing good coffee in humane circumstances, the best of them encouraging production of the big *pacamara* bean, a hybrid that makes a uniquely "buttery" coffee.

To live at all is to be implicated in the world's cruelty, a central Buddhist and Christian lesson, and the hermit's choice to escape from the world of wanting and getting seems, on the evidence, to despoil society of its humanism rather than to enrich it. The way to reconcile the buyer's appetite and the maker's welfare is to raise prices, to make the pleasure costlier. But it's one thing to ask people to pay more—whether for pastured beef or shade-grown coffee—and quite another to tell people that the pleasure they experience is not actually a pleasure but an insidious product of a conspiracy of taste. The second is unlikely to sustain social reform.

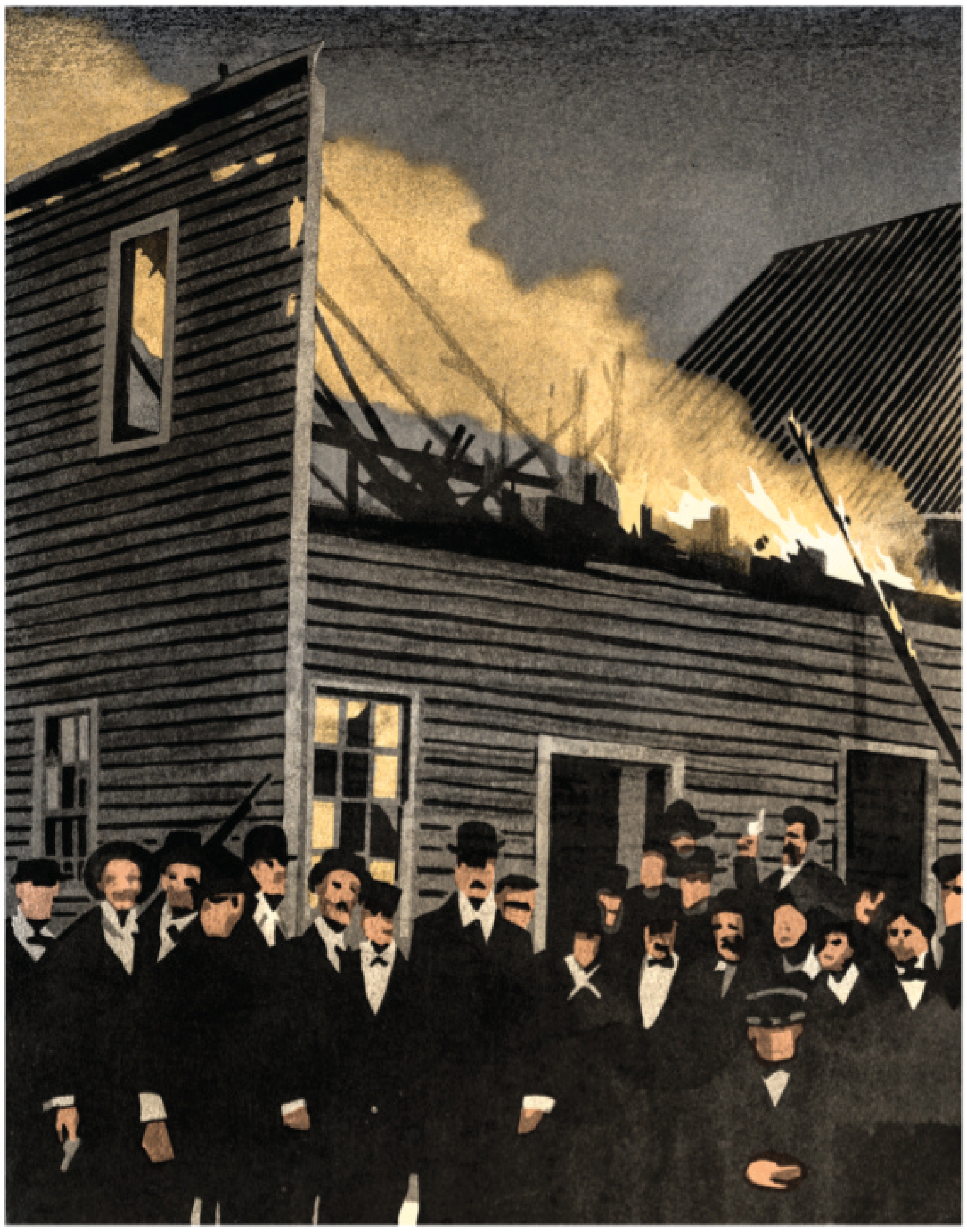
Coffee was perhaps the first naïve emissary of internationalism. In the seventeenth century, Iceland got the beans and became addicted, on the whole quite happily. You can't open a book about coffee, no matter what tone it takes, without reading a global story. Whatever else the current crisis may be teaching us, the one certain thing is that self-sufficiency is a non-solution to our suffering. None of us are sufficient, since none of us are complete selves, and what is true of each of us is true of every nation. Whether you pursue coffee as the ideal recreational drug from Istanbul hookah lounge to Ethiopian hideaway or see its dark track of exploitation from Salvadoran plantation to Detroit assembly line, you are inexorably led into stories that go everyplace on earth. On our tightly connected planet, it is impossible to sustain the policy of spite stores and their isolating spiral of envy. What happens here happens there. A bat may infect a pangolin in Wuhan, and the world shuts down. No café is an island and no latte can be Larry's alone. In these times, it's a lesson worth remembering. ♦

BOOKS

CITY LIMITS

What a white-supremacist coup looks like.

BY CALEB CRAIN



After burning down the office of a black newspaper, participants posed outside.

On November 10, 1898, just after Election Day, white supremacists overthrew the city government of Wilmington, North Carolina, forcing the resignation of the mayor, the aldermen, and the chief of police. A mob of white people burned down the office of an African-American newspaper and killed an unknown number of black townspeople. An eyewitness believed that more than a hundred died, and a state guardsman recalled, “I nearly stepped on negroes laying in the street dead.” In “Wilmington’s Lie” (Atlantic Monthly), a judicious and riveting new history of the coup, David Zucchino, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting from apartheid-era South Africa, estimates the number of deaths at more than sixty. The conspirators went on to expel prominent blacks from the city—by means of threats in some cases, and under armed guard in others—and also white politicians unsympathetic to the cause. The plan was hatched in secret, but the conspirators were remarkably open about the coup once it began. A reporter from out of town marvelled, “What they did was done in broad daylight.”

No conspirator was ever prosecuted, and white supremacists went on to alter state law so as to disenfranchise black people for more than two generations. There were more than a hundred and twenty-five thousand registered black voters in North Carolina in 1896, but only six thousand or so were still on the books by 1902. African-Americans fled Wilmington in large numbers, decimating what had been a large, thriving community. Before the coup, the city was majority black—at one point, it had the highest proportion of African-American residents of any large city in the South—and had several racially integrated neighborhoods. A visitor from Raleigh remembered black homes as having pianos, lace curtains, and servants. By the time of the 1900 census, a majority of its citizens were white.

In Plato’s Republic, Socrates proposes the concept of the “noble lie”—a fable that, though untrue, could inspire citizens to virtue, and “make them care more for the city and each other.” But what about the reverse—something all too true that might embolden bad actors to harm the state and their fellow-citizens? In Wilmington, the victory of racial prejudice over democratic principle and the rule of law was unnervingly complete. Within the lifetimes of those who experienced the coup, the arc of history that passed through Wilmington in 1898 didn’t bend toward anything close to justice.

“Up to but a few years ago, the best feeling among the races prevailed,” the black writer David Bryant Fulton wrote, in “Hanover; Or the Persecution of the Lowly,” his 1900 novel about the coup. Politically, however, tensions were rising, as the dominance that Democrats had enjoyed for decades waned. Since Reconstruction, the Party had won elections by harping on its history of thwarting federal attempts to grant rights to blacks, but, by the eighteen-nineties, white voters had other grievances on their minds. Farmers felt extorted by railroad companies and by creditors, and Democrats, cozy with corporate interests, opposed any government regulation of business. Voters defected to a new party, the Populists, which allied itself with the Republicans—at the time, still the party of Lincoln and committed to equal rights for blacks—to form the so-called Fusion ticket. In 1894, Fusionists swept state and county elections, and, two years later, North Carolina elected its first Republican governor since the end of Reconstruction.

Once in office, Fusionists restored

ILLUSTRATION BY BILL BRAGG

political power to African-Americans by making elections more fair—decentralizing control over them and reducing obstacles to voter registration. In 1896, a black Republican, George Henry White, beat a Democratic incumbent to become the only African-American congressman at the time, and voters also sent black politicians to the State Assembly and the State Senate. The next year, Wilmington installed several black aldermen and a Republican mayor, and pretty soon the city had a black jailer, coroner, superintendent of streets, and cattle weigher; the county treasurer and a federal customs collector were also black. To forestall white resentment, Wilmington's new police chief took the precaution of instructing the ten city police officers who were black never to arrest a white man. The proportion of officeholders who were black, compared with the proportion of Wilmington citizens who were, was tiny. Still, "Negro domination" became a powerful talking point for Democrats, because even progressive white politicians were not ready to make the case that it was desirable to have black people in office. The best defense that the Republican governor, Daniel Russell, was willing to offer was that, out of the more than eight hundred people he had appointed to office, only eight were black.

When the Democrats launched their 1898 campaign season, at the Party's state convention, in May, they made so-called Negro domination "the burden of their song," as Helen G. Edmonds put it in a pioneering history of black political participation in North Carolina and the backlash against it. She meant it metaphorically, but there really was a song. The lyrics, which Zucchino reprints, call on "Proud Caucasians" to "Rise and drive this Black despoiler from your state." The state chairman of the Democratic Party tapped the editor of the Raleigh *News & Observer*, Josephus Daniels, to head an anti-black propaganda campaign. Daniels's paper ran provocative headlines ("NO RAPE COMMITTED; BUT A LADY BADLY FRIGHTENED BY A WORTHLESS NEGRO") and wrote luridly about a white woman who had died trying to abort the child of her black lover. In an editorial cartoon, a black vampire, its wings emblazoned with the words "Negro Rule," extended claws toward fleeing whites.

"The Democrats would believe almost any piece of rascality," Daniels later recalled, in a memoir. "We were never very careful about winnowing out the stories." Newspapers across the state joined in, and a national magazine reported that a black man had fired into a trolley car and that black cooks were hinting they might poison their white employers. Sometimes a news item about a small misunderstanding between whites and blacks would hopscotch from paper to paper across the state, further exaggerated in each retelling, until it was reprinted in the paper where it started, unrecognized, as if it were a different story.

The Democrats issued a handbook identifying America as "a white man's country" and organized more than eight hundred White Government Union clubs, whose constitution called for "the SUPREMACY OF THE WHITE RACE." Come November, the clubs were to provide manpower for challenging black-voter registrations. When Wilmington's Democratic Party chair, George Rountree, gave a speech to one of the clubs, even he was taken aback by the members' racist zeal. "They were already willing to kill all of the office holders and all the negroes," he recalled.

"Go to sleep. Everything will be worse in the morning."

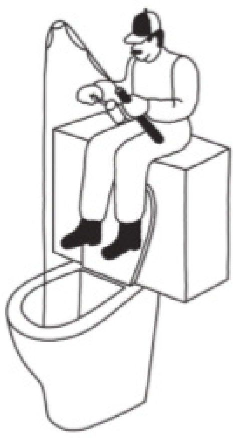
Statewide, Democrats were looking forward to a landslide in November, but in Wilmington the next municipal election wasn't until the following year, and the city's whites were impatient to regain power. So they planned a coup. "For a period of six to twelve months prior to November 10, 1898, the white citizens of Wilmington prepared quietly but effectively," a Democratic newspaperman there later wrote. Preparations were directed by two networks of élite whites, the Secret Nine and Group Six. The groups are known to history only because, in the nineteen-thirties, Harry Hayden, an amateur historian with white-supremacist sympathies, interviewed surviving participants and recorded their side of the story in a self-published pamphlet. According to Hayden, the Secret Nine set up a system of nightly patrols run by volunteers. Each block was assigned a lieutenant, each of the city's five wards was assigned a captain, and atop the chain of command stood a former Confederate colonel who had once led Wilmington's branch of the Ku Klux Klan. "The city might have been preparing for a siege instead of an election," a visiting reporter wrote, much impressed.

The ostensible justification for the patrols was the threat of a violent uprising among the city's black population. These rumors, a white Populist sardonically recalled, alarmed "every one but those who were behind the plot." One white woman in Wilmington dismissed the patrols as a "perfect farce," commenting that, in the run-up to the coup, blacks were "almost obsequiously polite." But, as the rumors spread, whites in Wilmington bought guns—enough to equip an Army division, one reporter estimated. Zucchino has discovered that, in the five weeks before the coup, a single hardware store sold a hundred and twenty-five rifles, more than two hundred pistols, and nearly fifty shotguns. Merchants refused to sell guns to blacks, and not many blacks already owned them. When two black men tried to order pistols and rifles direct from an out-of-state manufacturer, their request was forwarded to Josephus Daniels's newspaper, which then ran a story headlined "THE WILMINGTON NEGROES ARE TRYING TO BUY GUNS."

There was one Wilmington newspaper not in the service of the Democratic Party—the *Daily Record*, a broadsheet that claimed to be "of the Negro, for the Negro and *by* the Negro." It had been established some five years earlier by Alex Manly, a former housepainter, who ran it with his three brothers. Few editions of the paper have survived. David Bryant Fulton, in his novel about Wilmington, wrote that the paper exposed unsanitary conditions in the African-American ward at the city hospital and advocated for better roads. The fragments that remain were recently pieced together by the Third Person Project, a group of North Carolina writers and history buffs, and reveal an outlet for mostly local stories—a clergyman's birthday party, the theft of fourteen chickens from a coop, political skirmishes over the apportionment of government jobs—along with household tips ("Cold eggs froth most readily") and reprints of national news stories and short fiction.

In the summer of 1898, however, the *Daily Record* plunged into controversy. The Wilmington *Morning Star* had reprinted a speech by a Georgia congressman's wife arguing that lynching was justified "to protect woman's dearest possession from the ravening human beasts." Manly replied in an editorial that not all rapists were black, and that black men were often lynched for sexual liaisons that were, in fact, consensual. Flouting one of the South's most explosive taboos, he wrote that white women "are not any more particular in the matter of clandestine meetings with colored men than are the white men with colored women." Manly himself was strikingly handsome, and his complexion was so fair that even one of his sons admitted to wondering about his ancestry; so there may have been a bit of personal flourish in his assertion that many lynched men, far from being as "burly" and "black" as newspapers made them out to be, were "sufficiently attractive for white girls of culture and refinement to fall in love with them."

Manly was writing almost seventy years before Loving v. Virginia, the Supreme Court decision that struck down laws against interracial marriage, and the editorial got him and his paper cancelled. White business owners pulled ads, and the *Daily Record* was evicted by its landlord and forced to find new premises. Manly received death threats, public and private, and Democratic newspapers across the state reprinted the editorial as tinder for the white-supremacy campaign, in some cases quoting from it daily. The Democrats' outrage was to be expected, but even progressives felt compelled to denounce Manly. Governor Russell declared him his "enemy," and the state's Republican Party condemned the editorial as "impudent and villainous."



"That editorial in the negro newspaper is good campaign matter," a character says in Charles Chesnutt's 1901 novel, "The Marrow of Tradition," which lightly fictionalizes some of the events in Wilmington in 1898. "But we should reserve it until it will be most effective." The whites were saving their ammunition.

Early in October, Wilmington merchants promised to set up a whites-only labor bureau, and a rumor spread that blacks wanted to colonize North Carolina and turn it into a black commonwealth. "North Carolina is to be the refuge of their people in America," a journalist from Atlanta wrote. On October 20th, at a rally in Fayetteville, the South Carolina senator Ben Tillman, known as Pitchfork Ben, boasted to a crowd of eight thousand that whites there had smashed black civil rights two decades earlier, and wondered aloud why North Carolinians hadn't yet killed Manly.

Tillman was accompanied by a group of armed South Carolina vigilantes known as Red Shirts. The Red Shirts had a reputation for violence; LeRae Sikes Umfleet, who was the lead historian on a state-commissioned investigation into the coup, in the early two-thousands, described them as "effectively a terrorist arm of the Democratic Party." Their outfits were likely a reference to the phrase "waving the bloody shirt," a meme-like label that Southerners habitually used to deride any attempt to call them out for political violence. After Tillman's speech, the Red Shirts spread into North Carolina. In Wilmington, they were led by an Irish-American casual laborer named Mike Dowling, and, in the run-up to the election, they fired into a black school and at least one black home, and stabbed two black men.

In late October, the white-supremacist movement acquired a figurehead of sorts, a Wilmington lawyer and former congressman named Alfred Moore Waddell. Zucchino has discovered that, as a lawyer, Waddell defended lynchers, and that, while serving on a congressional committee investigating the Ku Klux Klan, he hosted the leader of the North Carolina Klan in his home. Described in Chesnutt's novel as "a dapper little gentleman," and in Fulton's as having a comb-over, he was distrusted even by fellow-Democrats, but he excelled at racist oratory, so the Wilmington Party chairman invited him to give a speech at Thalian Hall, which contained both the city's opera house and its municipal offices. Waddell asked the crowd of nearly a thousand if they were willing to surrender their liberty to "a ragged rabble of negroes led by a handful of white cowards" and urged them to defend their liberty even "if we have to choke the current of the Cape Fear with carcasses." He reprised the line about carcasses in another speech, on the eve of the election.

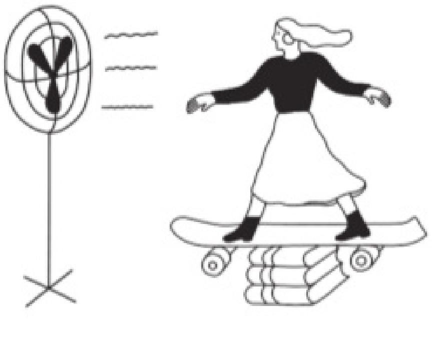
By Election Day, a white Populist recalled, African-Americans were "asking their white friends not to let them be hurt." Many confided to the police chief that they were not going to register or vote; Zucchino reports that, statewide, less than half the black voters who were eligible ended up going to the polls. Election Day itself was mostly peaceful, although Governor Russell, in Wilmington to cast his ballot, had to hide from Red Shirts on his train ride back to the capitol. For good measure, Wilmington's Democrats also tampered with vote totals. In the evening, around a hundred and fifty whites stormed the building where the count in a predominantly black precinct was taking place. The Democratic candidate ended up winning the precinct with more votes than there were registered voters.

It wasn't until the morning after the election, November 9th, that the brashest part of the conspiracy was put into action. The Secret Nine placed a notice in the Wilmington *Messenger* ("Attention White Men") convening a meeting at the courthouse. Both Waddell and Rountree, the Democratic Party chair, later claimed to have been surprised by the announcement, and they might have been—neither was a member of the Secret Nine or Group Six, and the conspirators may have been keeping Waddell, in particular, at arm's length. But at the meeting it was Waddell who read out the statement that the Secret Nine had prepared. The Wilmington Declaration of Independence, as it came to be known, proclaimed that whites had the right to "end the rule by Negroes," because they paid ninety-five per cent of property taxes. It resolved to hand over black people's jobs to whites; to shut down the "vile and slanderous" *Daily Record;* and to banish Manly, the mayor, and the police chief. Some four hundred and fifty whites signed the declaration, and most of them weren't the poor whites often blamed for racist outbreaks; a historian who researched the occupations of the signatories found that, of those she was able to trace, eighty-five per cent were middle or upper class.

Waddell was chosen to act as chairman of the meeting. That evening, he summoned thirty-two prominent African-Americans, read them the declaration, and demanded a reply by seven-thirty the next morning. The black leaders conferred in a barber shop, and one of them, a lawyer, wrote a reply. A surviving draft disavows responsibility for Manly and promises to "use our influence to have your wishes carried out." (In fact, as some of the men probably knew, Manly had already fled the city, reportedly having been given some money and the white patrols' watchword by a white friend.) The way to Waddell's house was guarded by the whites' armed night patrols, so, instead of delivering the letter by hand, the lawyer dropped it at the post office. It didn't reach Waddell by the early-morning deadline.

Zucchino thinks Waddell knew the letter was on the way, but, if he did, he didn't mention it to the crowd of five hundred armed whites who gathered that morning at the armory of the Wilmington Light Infantry. Furious about the missed deadline, the crowd asked the militia's officers to lead them to the *Daily Record.* The infantry's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Walker Taylor, refused, even though he belonged to Group Six, and his brother to the Secret Nine. Technically, the militia was still in federal service—it was home on furlough from the Spanish-American War—and it may have seemed unwise to involve the federal government in what was about to happen.

While Colonel Taylor telegraphed the capitol—"Situation here serious"—Waddell, Dowling, and a few others took charge of the crowd, which soon swelled to fifteen hundred men. Many were workers, but there were clergy and lawyers as well; the *Messenger* reported that "capitalists and laborers marched together," and a photograph later published in *Collier's Weekly* shows some men wearing neckties and fashionable hats. The crowd marched through a black neighborhood known as Brooklyn to the paper's new office, on the second floor of a building called the Love and Charity Hall. They broke in, tossed out furniture, a beaver hat, and a drawing of Manly, and set the building on fire. Waddell later claimed the fire was "purely accidental," but when a crew of black firefighters arrived to put out the blaze whites held them off until the second story of the building had been consumed. Then they posed in front of the ruins for a group photo.



It's all but impossible to reconstruct the sequence of the violence that followed, though Zucchino marshals the evidence expertly. Waddell claimed that he marched the whites back to the armory peacefully, but a newspaper reported that some of them boarded streetcars and rode around town, firing their guns as they passed through black neighborhoods. As alarm spread among the black community, workers at a cotton press on the riverfront walked out, only to find themselves facing a white mob that had heard about the walkout. A similar standoff in Brooklyn, at the intersection of North Fourth and Harnett Streets, turned violent; several black men were shot and killed. The owner of a pharmacy on the corner, who served as the block's lieutenant in the conspirators' vigilante system, telephoned the armory. As soon as Colonel Taylor received a telegram from Governor Russell ordering him to preserve the peace, he marched the Wilmington Light Infantry and a troop of naval reserves to Brooklyn. But before they reached Fourth and Harnett half a dozen more black men had been killed, and a few whites had also been shot, though they survived.

Preserving the peace is not quite what Taylor's militia did. Zucchino judges harshly Russell's decision to give "a committed white supremacist unchecked authority to unleash state troops against black citizens." En route, an officer told the men, "I want you to shoot to kill." When the militia crossed a bridge that led into Brooklyn, it opened fire on a group of blacks whom it perceived as a threat, killing an unknown number, perhaps as many as twenty-five. Militiamen trained horse-drawn, rapid-fire guns on black churches as they searched them for weapons—there weren't any—and shot a black man as he fled a dance hall where they were going in to make arrests.

There is also evidence of killings by whites which the militia witnessed but did nothing to halt. In a letter, one of the militiamen described watching the death of a black man who was believed by the mob to have shot at a white: "The crowd of citizens who had him said *go* and he hadn't gone ten feet before the top of his head was *cut off* by bullets. It was a horrible sight." At a certain point, it becomes hard to draw a line separating the actions of Taylor's troops from those of Waddell's citizens, or between the actions of either group and those of the Red Shirts. This confusion of responsibility may have been by design. It's not certain from the historical evidence that the white conspirators specifically planned arson and killings, but it is clear that the climate they created fomented arson and killings, and that the arson and killings helped accomplish their white-supremacist aims.

That afternoon, Waddell commanded Wilmington's mayor, police chief, and aldermen to report to the city offices at Thalian Hall, which were soon overrun with white rioters. The mayor resigned. The police chief briefly tried to hold out for the salary he was owed, but, after a warning that his personal safety could not be guaranteed, he resigned, too. The aldermen resigned one by one so that, as they went, the remainder could elect a white-supremacist replacement slate. Two of these, members of the Secret Nine, delayed their swearings in. They had been tasked with overseeing nearly fifty banishments ordered by the Secret Nine, including of the former mayor, the former police chief, and a number of the black community leaders whom Waddell had summoned the previous evening. They seem to have thought it prudent to keep a little legal distance between themselves and the city until the dirty work was done. There was no delay, however, about naming Waddell the new mayor.

As soon as the violence began, black residents fled to woods, swamps, and cemeteries on the periphery of the city. "The roads were lined with them, some carrying their bedding on their heads and whatever effects could be carried," a journalist wrote. They camped outdoors for days. Waddell boasted in *Collier's Weekly* that, as the new mayor, he sent messengers to these refugees, assuring them it was safe to return. He said, too, that, the night after the massacre, he had personally prevented the lynching of blacks held in the city jail by calling in the militia and staying on the scene himself until dawn. Once in office, he was, after all, "a sworn officer of the law," he explained. But he had trouble tamping down the mob behavior he had encouraged. His first declaration that armed volunteer patrols were no longer allowed in Wilmington was ignored; so was his second. "If he had any sense of humor he must have split his undergarments laughing at his own joke," a historian at a nearby university commented.

African-Americans were not taken in by his blandishments. One of them wrote an anonymous letter to President McKinley, protesting that "the Man who promises the Negro protection now as Mayor is the one who in his speech at the Opera house said the Cape Fear should be strewn with carcasses." People did return to their homes after a few days, but in many cases it was only to settle their affairs before leaving for good. As many as fifty or sixty were departing daily, newspapers reported. Between 1897 and 1900, the number of black names in the city directory dropped by nearly a thousand.

If you've never heard of the Wilmington coup before, one reason may be that white writers quickly framed it as a necessary and legal upsurge of democratic spirit. "It was not a *mob*," the Wilmington *Morning Star* declared. "It was simply the unanimous uprising of the white people." Waddell made the coup sound like a flowering of common sense and bonhomie: "The good old Anglo-Saxon way of waiting until government becomes intolerable, and then openly and manfully overthrowing it is for the best." Though the black writers Fulton and Chesnutt wrote novels that tried to preserve the memory of what happened in Wilmington, it was "The Leopard's Spots," a racist fictionalization by Thomas Dixon, Jr.—now remembered only for writing the book on which D. W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" was based—that became a best-seller. In Dixon's version of 1898 Wilmington, white children are "waylaid and beaten on their way to public schools"; the city's Declaration of Independence is a response to an attempt by blacks to lynch a white man; and, after the whites burn down Manly's paper, "a mob of a thousand armed Negroes concealed themselves in a hedgerow and fired on them from ambush."

In 1899, North Carolina's legislature, now overwhelmingly Democratic, dismantled almost all the Fusionists' reforms. Rountree, newly elected a state representative, helped craft a constitutional amendment requiring voters in the state to pay a poll tax and pass a literacy test unless a father or a grandfather had voted before 1867. The amendment also required voters to present proof of their identity during registration, if challenged. There wasn't much camouflage of the amendment's motive. "The chief object of the Amendment is to eliminate the ignorant and irresponsible Negro vote," the Democrats explained in a pamphlet. It passed in February, and in March, 1899, when Wilmington at last held its municipal election, only twenty-one blacks were registered to vote, and only five did so. The state legislature went on to pass North Carolina's first Jim Crow law, segregating train cars by race. Laws requiring separate toilets, water fountains, cinemas, parks, and courtroom Bibles followed. Wilmington did not elect another black alderman for more than seventy years, and North Carolina did not choose another black congressperson for more than ninety.

The truth was recovered by two black historians: Edmonds published her history in 1951, and H. Leon Prather, Sr., produced the second serious history of the coup in 1984. Later, Umfleet revised her work for the state-commissioned investigation in a lucid account that appeared in 2009. Today, a few historical markers in Wilmington acknowledge the coup, though Zucchino describes one of them as "listing and partially obscured." In 1998, centennial remembrances in Wilmington brought together two of Manly's nieces and descendants of Taylor and Rountree, among others, launching a public dialogue. Such events, and the publication of a book like Zucchino's, are a sign that, however late and reluctantly, America is becoming conscious of the racial violence that insured white supremacy after Reconstruction.

Still, memory and understanding alone are morally ambiguous. In 2018, North Carolina passed a constitutional amendment that limited the vote to holders of a state-issued photo identification. The measure reprises the kind of obstacle to black-voter registration cleared away by Fusionists in 1895 and restored by white-supremacist Democrats in 1899. Merely remembering the past will hardly stop those who are trying to repeat it. ♦

THE THEATRE

OTHERWORLDLY WOMEN

The unproduced plays of Kathleen Collins.

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM

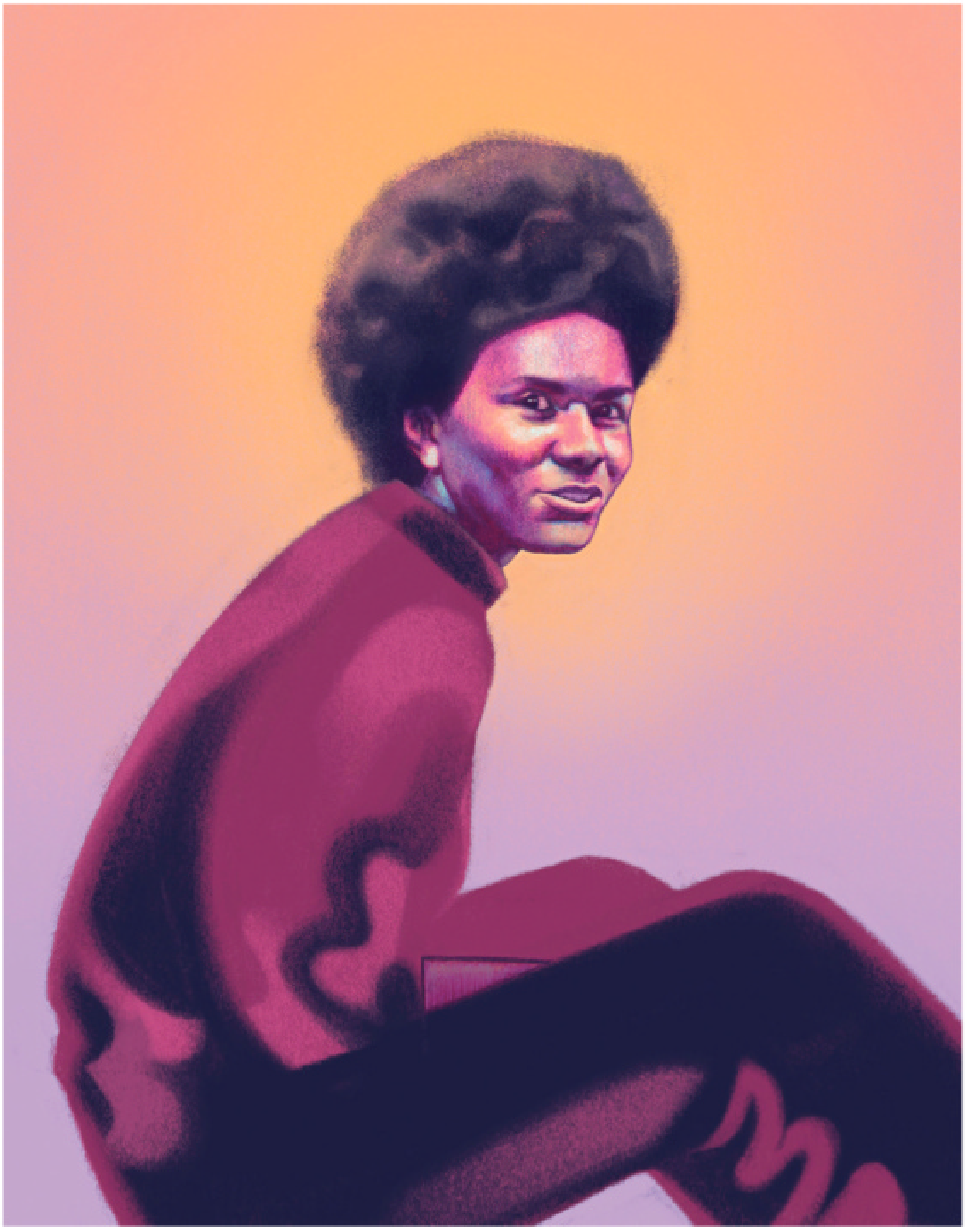


ILLUSTRATION BY XIA GORDON

Good news, these past four years, has been vanishingly sparse, like a handful of lilies in a fallow field. One of the brightest of these rare flowers is the renewal of interest in the filmmaker, playwright, and fiction writer Kathleen Collins, who died, at the age of forty-six, in 1988. Under the guidance of her daughter, Nina Lorez Collins, Collins's written work has come to us in a posthumous torrent, first with the 2016 short-story collection "Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?," then with the eclectic omnibus "Notes from a Black Woman's Diary," which includes fiction, a pair of screenplays, excerpts from Collins's diary, and scripts for plays. Her richly symbolic, formidably smart feature film "Losing Ground," from 1982, has recently been rediscovered and restored to its rightful place in the canon of nineteen-eighties independent film.

In Collins's work, black women's quotidian struggles take on cosmic proportions.

Collins was, foremost, an artist and an interpreter of the striated psyche. Her most striking characters are black women of a creative or intellectual bent—writers, dancers, designers, professors—whose quotidian struggles with marriage, motherhood, and work take on cosmic proportions. In "Losing Ground," Sara Rogers (played by the actor and theatre director Seret Scott), a vibrant professor of philosophy whose lectures are a kind of poetry, can feel herself being eclipsed by her husband, an impulsive painter named Victor (Bill Gunn, the director of the cult-classic vampire film "Ganja & Hess"). Sara's students can't bring up her brilliance without also mentioning her marriage, she notices. "What's this thing they've got about my having a husband?" she wonders.

Her scholarship is a medium for abandon: one of the most enthralling scenes has her sitting in a library, reading; a propulsive, half-muttered voice-over shows how meditatively and almost prayerfully she takes to the task. In part because of her growing troubles with Victor, she conducts an ambitious study of "the ecstatic," a state that her husband accesses easily but which feels alien to her.

In one lovely and suggestive passage, Sara goes to see a psychic, asking her what it feels like to "read" another person and see her future. The session is unsatisfying; the psychic can't understand this scientific approach to a process that, to her, is totally intuitive. She says she can tell that Sara is "intelligent," which sends Sara into a fit of anger. Anybody could figure that out by looking at her face. Unsettled, she leaves and wanders toward what looks like a small Catholic church. "This is ridiculous," she says, just before she enters and rushes down the aisle, toward the altar, where, as if urged by some unseen force, she kneels. "What am I looking for?"

The components of that scene—dispassionate inquiry, occult oddity, the search for understanding as an attempt at control, a wary but nonetheless ardent relationship with Christian imagery and thought—are even more densely woven and excruciatingly resolved in Collins's one-act plays, several of which are collected in "Notes from a Black Woman's Diary." In fact, it's possible, just by reading three of them together, to put on a subtle, harrowing program of drama dealing with doubt, domestic confusion, and the persistent encroachments of color and of the spirit. The plays take place in rooms that are at once specific and archetypal—a bedroom, a doctor's office—and therefore seem designed to be staged in your living room.

In "Remembrance," a woman approaching middle age addresses the audience directly. Atop a dresser, she has erected a simple shrine—a candle, a cross, a bouquet of flowers. She has begun, she tells us, to find God. "It's not easy to pin down the exact moment when I went looking for God," she says, trailing off, but it has something to do with her sense of her unfitness for everyday life. She's a dancer by craft, and here, at home, she's a distracted mother and wife. Her husband does the cooking and shoulders the burden of being "a hundred percent all here." She hides in the bathroom, trying to "locate myself, apart from other things," finely slivering her own identity away from those others—husband, kids—who threaten to swallow her up. "I try to get them out of me!" she says.

God helps in this endeavor, somehow. "He's so silent, and His silence is such a lovely thing," she says. Later, she prays aloud, "Cause me to remember that I may locate myself forever inside Your silence and be still." In this paradoxical idea—that God, the ultimate showstopper, makes room for the woman instead of further constraining her—there is something reminiscent of Thomas Aquinas's insistence that God isn't a Big Thing among other things, competing with us creatures for glory and space to breathe but, rather, the ground upon which we stand—a kind of stage. "*Gloria Dei vivens homo*," the early Church father Irenaeus said: "The glory of God is the living man."

But the woman's faith, such as it is, isn't orthodox, or strictly Christian. On the contrary, she's frustrated by her fixation on the tradition of her youth. She riffles through tropes—"the Old Rugged Cross, the Fountain Filled with Blood"—and snorts derisively at her mastery of them, at the idea that "you could open the Christian language and find God." Her own alternate language is gilded and profane. "I want to pee on the living room rug," she says, "flaked as it is with fake Oriental gold colors that will not be distinguishable from my fake Oriental gold urine." This is a horror story, with domestic normalcy as the invisible, malevolent force, and a wild, unknowable deity as a balm.

"Remembrance" is dedicated to Seret Scott, and it's hard not to think of its protagonist as an opposite of "Losing Ground"'s Sara Rogers: instead of trying to analyze the ecstatic, this woman dives into it head first. Another play, "The Reading," feels like a takeoff on the psychic scene in "Losing Ground." Two women—one white, one black—sit in a psychic's waiting room. The black woman, Marguerite, is a fashion designer, and the white woman, Helen, is a novelist. There's a candle that keeps going out: it stays lit only if one of the women sits before it in a lotus pose, stares at it "belligerently," or meditates.

This focus on light sharpens as the play winds on, hinting at the visual facility that makes "Losing Ground" such a sensual feast for the eyes. But, in lieu of film's ability to make the sublime unspoken (in one beautiful frame of "Losing Ground," a woman dressed in a red shirt and a billowing yellow skirt stands dancing in front of a calm, blue-black lake, an image that's spiritual and striking enough to occasion a library of mystical texts), in "The Reading" Collins navigates there by way of an exasperating clash between the races.

Helen wants to unload the facts of her life on Marguerite, who's not at all interested. The psychic—who never makes it onstage—is black, too, and it becomes clear that this accounts for much of Helen's attraction to this particular practice. Helen quotes the woman at length, adding a "black" accent for effect. The women are mismatched attitudinally as well: Marguerite is impeccably put-together, while Helen has made her slacker's outfit an aspect of her personality. In a sharp oppositional couplet that illustrates Collins's genius for icily intelligent dialogue, as cold and clarifying as Aaron Copland's "Four Piano Blues," the women disagree about Helen's sartorial affliction. Helen calls it "my casualness about clothes." For Marguerite, it's "your unwillingness to dress." Still, these mutually resentful women can't disengage: their womanhood, and an accompanying unease in the world, keep them yoked together, entangled in talk.

The strangest, perhaps, is an abstract play called "The Healing." A sick black woman, Ellen, has come to see Joe, a white healer who glides his hands around her body, applying "energy" to her illness. Sometimes he holds her feet to keep them "grounded." Ellen implores him not to: the gesture reminds her too much of Christ washing the feet of his disciples. Like the woman from "Remembrance," she doesn't want to fall victim to iconography. She fights her desire to sing along with Joe to the refrain of an old spiritual: "Somebody's crying, Lord / Come by here." Joe keeps applying pressure to various regions of her body, and—like so many of us, witnesses to strange happenings but unequipped to interpret them—she feels waves of relief and consolation, skeptic though she is. Even as a thrill runs through her, she cries, "I don't even believe." ♦

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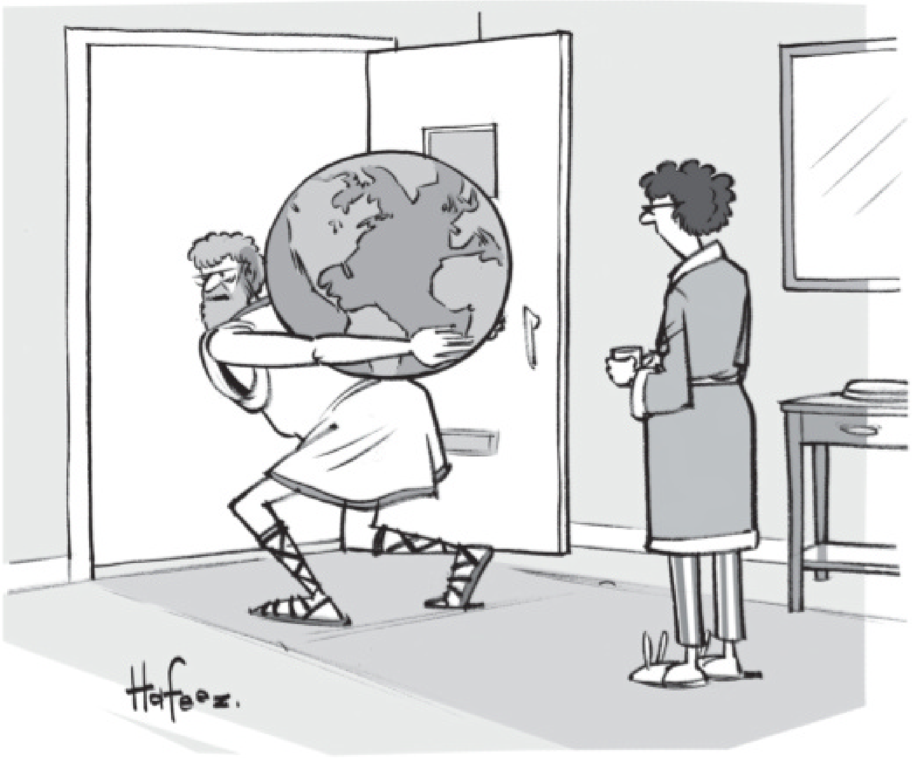
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Kaamran Hafeez, must be received by Sunday, April 26th. The finalists in the April 13th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the May 11th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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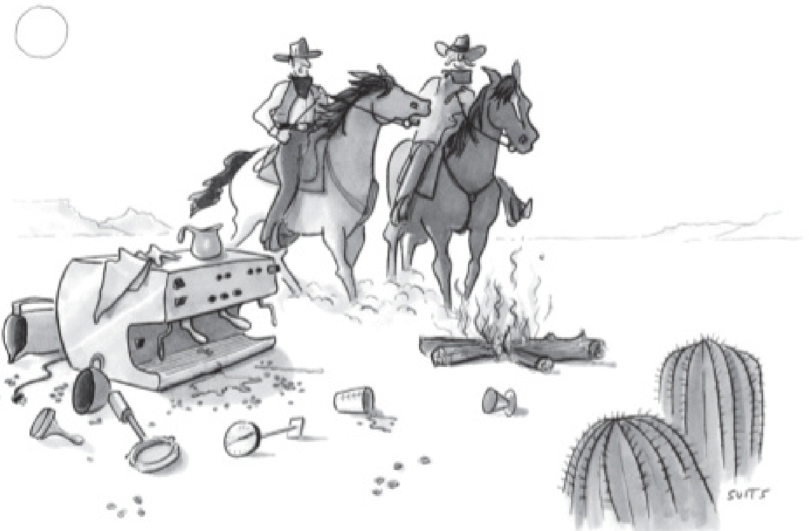
THE FINALISTS

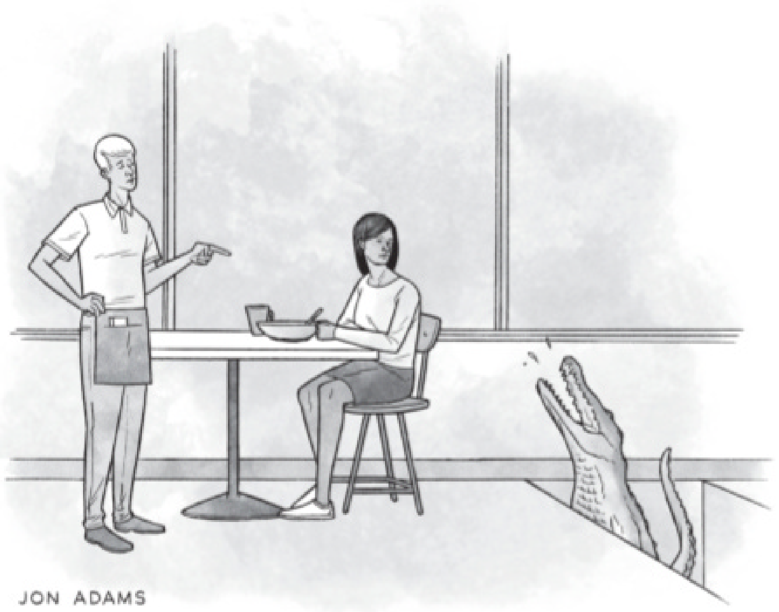


“Grounds still warm . . .”
John Semanchuk, Charleston, S.C.

“Americanos.”
Andrew Eichen, Boone, N.C.

“Decaf. They can't be far away.”
Bill Clough, Modesto, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Past the alligator, through the ring of fire, first door on your left.”
Gregory W. Kirschen, Woodbury, N.Y.

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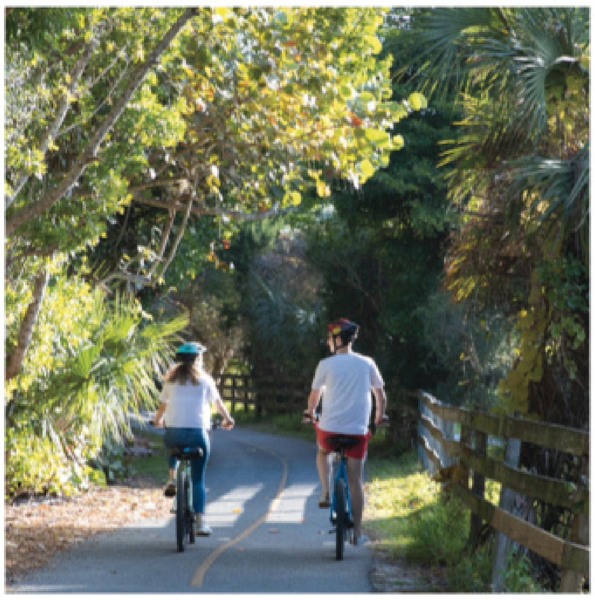

WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT, HEAD TO SOUTHWEST FLORIDA'S NATURAL WONDERLAND FOR A RESTORATIVE GETAWAY.

Just imagine: You're driving over the scenic causeway to Sanibel Island, feeling your breath deepen and your shoulders relax. Known as a shell collector's paradise and a carefully preserved sanctuary for Gulf Coast flora and fauna, Sanibel Island is the place to connect with nature at its most rejuvenating.

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